



Contemplating the state of sustainable agriculture

By Heather Clancy | April 27, 2011



If you're wondering what the future of sustainable agriculture might look like — notice I did not use the term “agribusiness” — you might want to read about the four individuals who are just recognized through the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) (NRDC) Growing Green Awards.

The crux of [these awards](#) is that they recognize innovations in sustainable agricultural that encourage the rise of so-called sustainable agriculture — which encourages farming according to methods that don't introduce chemical pesticides or that emphasize an increase in production while using fewer natural resources.

Jonathan Kaplan, senior policy specialist at NRDC, explained the rationale for the awards during a press conference Tuesday afternoon to introduce the winners:

“The planet is facing a very serious environmental challenge [with respect to food and agriculture] and it is clear that we won't solve them without engaging in action with respect to the food system.”

Here's are some of the innovative things that year's winners are doing:

- Jim Cochran of the [Swanton Berry Farm](#) near Santa Cruz, Calif., gets props as “2011 Food Producer” for being one of the first farms in the nation to adopt organic farming methods for strawberries. He also is recognized for being among the first to introduce ideas like employee stock ownership, health coverage and pensions for farm workers. (He started doing this 28 years ago, by the way!)
- Molly Rockamann, the “2011 Young Food Leader” founded an organization called [EarthDance Farms](#) in Ferguson, Mo., that focuses on sustainable agricultural methods. She is recognized for an internship program that encourages participants to learn the complete cycle of organic farming (from seed to market).
- Ann Cooper is the “2011 Knowledge Winner,” aka the “Renegade Lunch Lady.” She has started several programs that help schools figure out how to transition to healthy

ingredients, even introduced salad bars. She started with her own day job in the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado. Her non-profit is called the [Food Family Farming Foundation](#).

- Pam Marrone is the “2011 Business Leader,” recognized for her championing of biopesticides. Her company is [Marrone Bio Innovations](#), and its focus is on using microorganisms and plants to control pests while reducing risks to human health.

There has been some wonderful coverage of sustainable agriculture recently, including this great opinion piece from the New York Times, “[Sustainable Farming Can Feed the World?](#)” The column by Mark Bittman focuses on a report from the United Nations in December 2010, called “[Agro-ecology and the Right to Food.](#)” The analysis is focused on the idea of helping smaller farmers be more productive, while being true to the environment.

As the Times column suggests, the focus on generating more and more crops with little regard to the long-term effect on the earth and water supply isn’t, if you’ll pardon the pun, sustainable. By encouraging more smaller farmers to be involved, the column argues, the world will be less susceptible to the disastrous impacts of droughts or whacky temperature fluctuations or typhoons.

Bittman writes:

“Industry (or ‘conventional’) agriculture requires a great deal of resources, including disproportionate amounts of water and fossil fuel that’s needed to make chemical fertilizer, mechanize working the land and its crops, running irrigation sources, heat buildings and crop dryers and, of course, transportation. This means it needs more in the way of resources than the earth can replenish.”

Another report along these lines was just released by [The Worldwatch Institute](#), called “[State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet.](#)” You have to pay for the full report, but like the United Nations analysis, it calls for a focus on local and indigenous vegetables as a means of curbing food shortages and skyrocketing food prices. Said Danielle Nierenberg, co-director of Worldwatch’s Nourishing the Planet project:

“The solutions to the price crisis won’t necessarily come from producing more food, but from listening to farmers, investing in indigenous vegetables and changing how foods are processed and marketed.”

Some of the recommendations, which are explored in the report:

- Listen to farmers, and help them identify what works
- Get seeds to farmers
- Take advantage of what is local
- Look at ways to reduce food waste
- Focus on water management
- Harness the skills of women farmers