

Eco Farm Day bursting at the seams: chair

Posted By KATHLEEN HAY, STANDARD-FREEHOLDER, Saturday, February 28th, 2009

Organic farmers know how to get growing and nowhere is this more apparent than at Eco Farm Day.

Although the conference has been in existence for more than 25 years, it has nearly doubled in size since coming to Cornwall five years ago, said event chair Tom Manley. "I think it's fair to say it's the largest farming conference of any type in eastern Ontario up to Peterborough," he said Friday. "When we first held it in Cornwall, we had about 250 people on the Saturday, but we're expecting 450. "We're basically busting at the seams now."

The two-day event, "The Business of Agriculture from Field to Fork," is hosted by the Canadian Organic Growers (Ottawa Chapter) at the Ramada Inn. It began Friday with a day-long seminar which focused on organic sector issues, as well as challenges in organic farming, including standards and federal regulations. "This is a very important issue," Manley said. "A big problem is trying to harness our standards with other trading partners, such as the United States, as they vary from country to country."

Keynote speaker at Friday night's gala was Eliot Coleman who is a 40-year veteran of organic farming. An author of several books, he also served two years as executive director of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, and is a former advisor to the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

Also on-hand for the event was Kim Thorne, of Guelph, who is executive director of the Organic Council of Ontario. She, too, remarked on the growth of the farming sector. "In 2008, we saw a 20 per cent growth across the whole sector of organic farming, it's huge," she said. "They get an incredible turnout for this conference, and as the sector grows, these conferences will become more and more important."

The produce prices of organic farmers tend to better reflect the true costs of farming, said Thorne. In Canada, we have "incredibly cheap food" with a "very small" portion of incomes actually spent on it. As a result, many conventional farmers are in the red economically. "Organic farmers can make a living at farming as they build in a price premium," explained Thorne. "But it is also more labour intensive as there is more hands-on care, and depending on the farms, sometimes the yield is lower. "And it doesn't always cost more to eat organic. "You need to check comparisons more as they aren't always side-by-side in stores."

Either way, there's no taste comparison, according to Manley. "The food tastes great to begin with, and you can't beat the environmental and health benefits," Manley said.

The conference continues today from 9 a. m. to 4:30 p. m. Registration is \$60 and includes talks, lunch and the trade show. As well, the public is invited to attend the trade show free-of-charge from 1 p. m. onwards. For more information, visit www.ecofarmday.ca