

In Appreciation: John Bell Clark, 1937 - 2006

Stop Dignifying the Myth of Pesticide Benefits

I met John not long after Beyond Pesticides (back then National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides, NCAMP) was formed in 1981. He and Merrill, his wife, came to one of the early annual National Pesticide Forums to make sure that our fledgling organization was clear and unequivocal on the need for and purity of organic agriculture as the basis for fighting chemical agriculture. In those years, mainstream agriculture and food processors questioned the commercial viability of organic.

John wanted to ensure that there was a national organization, with a social conscience and integrity, that provided a strong, clear voice. So, he came to Washington, DC armed with the facts about his and Merrill's experience since 1978 on their 1800-acre farm in Cassopolis, Michigan, the southwest part of the state. That was my introduction to Roseland Organic Farms, an organic beef farm, where in-season vegetables are also cultivated and sold. John was emphatic that on his family farm there would be no parasiticides, antibiotics, hormones or growth regulators, insecticides or herbicides and 100% certified organic feed would be fed to the animals.

Those who knew John know that he did not mince his words. And he was not shy about his views. At our meetings, he would lean over in his chair or sometimes stand in the back of the room, listen intently to the conversation or speaker, collect his thoughts, and then have at it. In that style, John brought to Beyond Pesticides in the early years the notion that pesticides are not necessary. He did not believe the organization should tinker with acceptable risk calculations of chemicals that were not needed. He brought this message to us at a time when regulators, Congress, academics, and even some of our environmental friends questioned the "credibility" of that position. But, John hammered away and brought his own experience to the table, armed with his Ph.D. in biochemistry from the University of California. John wrote, "The results are almost always the same: Yields get better as organic practices are continued, and pest problems virtually disappear. Natural pest controls, which are suppressed in chemical farming, get healthier and more effective every year. Plant and livestock health improves; soil tilth improves every year, and so does soil moisture retention."

John continued, "There are no secrets or surprises, only simple, economical management practices: long-term crop rotation; leguminous and nonleguminous green manure incorporation; mechanical cultivation; clipped forages and allelopathic crops in rotation; preservation of

habitat for beneficial insects and other natural control organisms. It all really does work! The compelling conclusion to this experiment and its repeatable results in the organic community is that the highly touted benefits for pesticide and fertilizer input are nonexistent. These "benefits" are measured wrongly." And this is quintessential John: "We need to stop dignifying the myth of the benefits of pesticides, and we need to stop pretending that there can ever be "safe"--- or even effective-poisons. There are too many thousands of species of insects for this ever to apply. "Close" only counts in horseshoes. Pesticide-free farming has to be just that --totally free of pesticides."



John convinced Beyond Pesticides to research and then write the landmark report *Unnecessary Risks: The Benefit Side of the Pesticide Risk-Benefit Equation* in the early 1990's. The acknowledgments state, "A special thanks to biochemist/farmer Dr. John Clark, for encouraging the NCAMP board and staff of the need for this study and for sharing conclusions based on his scientific and agricultural experiences." John was a board member of Beyond Pesticides from 1987 to 1990.

Unnecessary Risks, inspired by John, has served as the guiding light for the organization. The report documents the bias and failure of EPA's pesticide regulatory system that "keeps pesticides on the market despite the availability of alternative pest management practices that are viable, productive and profitable -- in some cases more so than chemical approaches."

John never wanted us to accept the arguments of those who attribute benefits to pesticides, and a regulatory system that assumes pesticide benefits in the marketplace, and a risk assessment approach that accepts allowable but unnecessary hazards or risks -- expressly because pesticides are not necessary.

John, we appreciate the knowledge, dedication, outrage, time, and love that you gave to our organization. We will miss you. Your words, thoughts, perseverance, and inspiration will be carried on.

--Jay Feldman, executive director, Beyond Pesticides

Roseland Farms raises cattle and calves only on Roseland pasture, hay and a mix of the farm's own grains, including oats, sunflower, milo and buckwheat, and ships nationwide, 269-445-5817, www.roselandorganicfarms.com. Contributions in John's memory may be made to the Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance, PO Box 36880, Grosse Pointe Farms, MI 48236 or to Merrill Clark, 27427 M-60 West, Cassopolis, MI 49031.