Policy, Science & Organic Agriculture

Winning Hearts & Minds in the Quest for a Healthy, Sustainable Food System

An interview with Charles Benbrook is seriously overdue, and we are delighted to finally offer it. For many years now, whenever we've needed to hear from a sane, experienced, exquisitely well-informed voice from the nexus of agricultural science and public policy, Chuck Benbrook's number has been the one to call first. As he recalls below, Benbrook worked in Washington, D.C., on agricultural policy, science and regulatory issues from 1979 through 1997. In 1998 he developed Ag BioTech InfoNet, one of the Internet's most extensive independent sources of technical, policy and economic information on biotechnology. Currently Benbrook runs Benbrook Consultant Services, a small firm based in Sandpoint, Idaho. His activities include consulting for the Consumers Union to ensure implementation of the Food Quality Protection Act, a key piece of legislation signed in 1996 that prompted important changes in pesticide use patterns and pest management systems. He is also the driving force behind the Organic Center, which does more to illuminate the key scientific issues in sustainable agriculture than other groups with far more extensive resources. The big problem with interviewing Chuck Benbrook was knowing when to stop.

Charles Benbrook

ACRES U.S.A. Could you tell us how your personal history turned you into a scientist with a special interest in farm policy and sustainable agriculture?

CHARLES BENBROOK. Right out of college I went to British Columbia in Canada and tried my hand at farming. I had a large sheep operation in British Columbia, couldn't make it financially, and went back to graduate school.

ACRES U.S.A. Are you from the Northwest?

BENBROOK. No, I grew up in California, went to college back east in Massachusetts, and spent seven years in British Columbia. I wasn't a draft dodger — I just went up there to live in the mountains and really wasn't sure I wanted to farm, but that's what I ended up doing. We lived in some of the most beautiful places I ever could imagine living. It was a great time to be up there, but it was really difficult to make a living.

ACRES U.S.A. Were you farming conventionally?

BENBROOK. At that time I didn't know much about organic farming. We had a large, basically grass-based livestock operation. We bought a 250-head cattle ranch and converted it to sheep. I think I probably used a little bit of fertilizer, but we weren't consciously farming organically at the time. We were a grass-based livestock operation.

ACRES U.S.A. It sounds like you didn't have the money to farm industrially.

BENBROOK. No, we sure didn't! At that point I had a couple of kids and returned to the States and went to University

of Wisconsin at Madison. In the fall of 1977, I got a Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics and was recruited into the tail end of the Carter administration. My first ag policy job was with the Council on Environmental Quality, which is a small office of the President that works on the coordination of federal policy across all the agencies. I was hired as the junior agricultural policy person, more or less. At the time the Carter administration was finishing up what was called the National Agricultural Land Study, which helped put the loss of farm land on the policy map. The first round of the old Resources Conservation Act review was coming to closure at the end of the Carter presidency, and there was some pesticide-related stuff going on along with other issues. So I moved to Washington and worked in a Schedule C appointment for the last year-and-a-half of the Carter administration. When Reagan was elected the transition came and I lost my job along with all of the other Schedule C people throughout the government, but was very fortunate to get a job as a staff director on one of the congressional subcommittees working in agriculture. I worked for Congressman George Brown of California, who was the chair of the subcommittee of the House Ag Committee — it was the oversight subcommittee. It was called the DORFA, the subcommittee on Department Operations, Research and Foreign Agriculture. This DORFA subcommittee also had jurisdiction over the pesticide law, FIFRA, which was my first introduction to pesticide issues. I served during the first three years of the Reagan presidency in this agricultural job on Capitol Hill.

ACRES U.S.A. How were you introduced to organics?

BENBROOK. My deskmates in the Longworth House Office Building were two guys who worked for Congressman Jim Weaver of Oregon, and in calendar year 1981 they drafted the first organic farming act. Because I shared the office with these guys working for this subcommittee on forest and family farms chaired by Jim Weaver, a lot of the organic people came by, including Bob Rodale. He had made one of his many trips to Washington and was encouraging Congressman Weaver and the House agricultural committee to develop legislation to support and promote sustainable organic agriculture. I had a really great run on the Hill. I enjoyed my job greatly. I worked for one of the true gentlemen in the Congress, back when the Congress still worked as an institution. I really loved my job, but after three years I was recruited into the National Academy of Sciences to become executive director of the board on agriculture, which was one of the eight major operating units of NAS. It was quite a step up for a relatively young professional to become the staff leader of this prestigious group of scientists working under the umbrella of NAS. But I took the job and started there early in 1984, and did that for seven years.

> "Ranchers would get big tractors and disc up a couple thousand acres of dry range land and then hope that it rained. If it did rain and they got a little bit of a crop, they'd establish some farm program base and get money from the government. If it didn't rain, they'd get a disaster payment."

ACRES U.S.A. What were your experiences there?

BENBROOK. We had a very productive run at the academy. Among other things, we put out the *Alternative Agriculture* report in 1989, which is still regarded as a watershed in terms of recognition by the scientific and policy communities that sustainable and organic agriculture actually have something to contribute. By the time I'd landed the job in the NAS I was definitely onto a career path of Washington-related policy jobs that were very analytical in their orientation, typically required a lot of report writing, and basically covered the intersection of agriculture, health, the environment and policy. That's really what I've done throughout my career.

ACRES U.S.A. What led you into writing up some of the first legislation to deal with sustainable agriculture?

BENBROOK. At that time, in the early '80s in Washington, there were continuing and growing concerns about chemical use in agriculture. Solid data were emerging on the presence of pesticides in drinking water in a lot of areas, particularly the Midwest. Independent toxicological research was starting to raise much more serious questions about the adverse health affects of exposure to pesticides, and there was concern about nitrogen fertilizer in drinking water. At the same time there was ongoing concern about soil erosion and the conversion of wetlands to farmland and the breaking out of highly erodible land. A pretty significant focus on soil erosion in the early '80s culminated in the passage of the historic conservation title in the 1985 farm bill that included the Conservation Reserve Program, the so-called Conservation Compliance Provision and a policy called Sodbuster, which basically said to farmers that if you break out highly erodible virgin prairie by "sodbusting," you would place in jeopardy your farm program payments on other parts of your farm. As conceived by Congress and originally passed, it was a hell of a deterrent to try to stop the western migration of dryland farms. Ranchers would get big tractors and disc up a couple thousand acres of dry range land in Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma or Colorado and then hope that it rained. If it did rain and they got a little bit of a crop, they'd get some money out of the market and establish some farm program base and get money

from the government. If it didn't rain, they'd get a disaster payment.

ACRES U.S.A. What does that anecdote tell us about the way public money was and is spent?

BENBROOK. Back in the early '80s, one of the dominant themes in trying to reform farm policy was that so much of the existing federal policy and actual expenditure of dollars subsidized bad practices and made it more economically attractive for farmers to do things that were completely contrary to other major national goals — for example, controlling soil erosion, keeping the sediment and chemicals out of water, promoting biodiversity, keeping the cost of agricultural production down. The big theme in the 1985 farm bill, which was also certainly front and center in the 1990 farm bill, was how to turn around many of the federal agricultural subsidy streams to support production systems and decision-making on farms that were consistent with goals other than just getting some money into farmers' pockets. I think some progress has been made in that regard, but clearly we have a long way to go.

ACRES U.S.A. You said Congress was more functional back then. How much did you have to battle the Reagan people, and what parallels have you noticed between the recently ended Bush era and the Reagan years — two very different right wing, corporatist administrations?

BENBROOK. When I started working there, right at the beginning of the first Reagan term, the Congress was still an institution where the people in it respected folks on the other side of the aisle and in fact often were friends with them. Sure, there were policy differences and you fought hard to promote your point of view, but there was a deference to the institution and the processes or mechanics — you might say the ecosystem of the Congress. At the time it was regarded as important to maintain it in as healthy a way as possible, and that required a certain amount of checking your ego at the door, respecting the other side of the aisle, not having the majority run roughshod over the minority, and trying to seek out the best ideas openly, debate them openly, and then pass legislation that adopted the best of the ideas, whether they came from Democrats or Republicans. I spent a lot of time with Pat Roberts, the senior Senator from Kansas now. Pat used to be in the House and he was the ranking minority member on our subcommittee. He was and still is a very funny guy and a thoughtful man. He listened. He really liked Mr. Brown, my boss. I think the congressional process actually had a beneficial impact on legislation back then in ways and to a degree that is simply not true anymore.

"There's been a brain drain across the federal government that really is a serious impediment now."

ACRES U.S.A. When did it change?

BENBROOK. It started to change when Reagan was elected, but it was really after the '84 election when Newt Gingrich and this big conservative class came in. He started the process of politicizing the Congress in a way that eroded the ability of members to work in a true bipartisan fashion. Jim Wright contributed to it to a certain extent, but by 1990 the Congress was a very different place and was stuck in a trajectory of change that has brought us to this day, where you have President Obama elected at a time of historic economic pressures in the country, and even before he takes office he's starting to work on the economic stimulus package that the Republicans and Democrats in the Congress agreed was needed. Yet lo and behold, a few weeks later when the legislation comes up not a single Republican votes for it. Back in the first term of the Reagan presidency, it would have been unimaginable that either the Democrats or the Republicans would have found it so easy to be completely partisan in a vote like that — it just wouldn't have happened. I think that a lot of bad things have happened in the federal government in the last 20 years, and certainly the two that I've witnessed the most closely and which I think are most important to turn around are, first, the systematic undermining of the ability to be bipartisan in the Congress, to allow Republicans and Democrats to compete in the world of ideas and let the best ideas float to the top as opposed to the most politically expedient.

ACRES U.S.A. And the second?

BENBROOK. The other big problem arose from an attitude in the Reagan presidency and both Bush presidencies — in particular Bush II — to put it bluntly, their open disdain for the civil service and government agencies and people working in government. These three administrations, but in particular Bush II, drove out of government agencies so many of the smart, well-trained, experienced professionals that you need to help implement laws and run the government. There's been a brain drain across the federal government that really is a serious impediment now. You can't just change the nameplates on the administrator's office and a couple of the other senior political offices in an agency like FEMA or the Agricultural Marketing Service or the FDA and expect those agencies to perform in a substantially and markedly better way. It takes bringing in people who don't come in with ideological agendas, who believe in the Constitution and implementing the laws as Congress passed them and trying to do good on behalf of the American people. Many of the people that were brought into government by these Republicans were brought in because they were trusted ideologues. After enough years of that you drive out of government those people who are really committed to going where the facts lead and using good, solid, credible, unbiased analysis and good science to inform government decision-making.

ACRES U.S.A. What, in your view, happened to food safety during the Bush years and how could it be fixed, if it needs fixing?

BENBROOK. Well, it's fairly obvious that it needs fixing. We have a food system now that probably is making more people sick than 30 or 40 years ago. Despite all the progress that's been made with technology, the food industry has changed and evolved much like many other industries. There's a hierarchy of companies, including those that are very professional, well-established, committed to producing a high-quality nutritious and safe product, and absolutely determined to protect consumer confidence in their brand. Often those are the same companies that do a good job in dealing with recycling and waste in their plants and are active members in the communities where their plants are located. But there are also bottom feeders, companies that for whatever reason decide they want to make a quick buck by cutting corners and not spending extra money on things they don't feel are absolutely essential. That mindset leads to companies like Peanut Corporation of America, where you had a relatively young, ambitious guy come in and get control and just squeeze all the costs out of the process that are required to assure a safe product, and lo and behold the plant started putting out unsafe food on a routine basis. If you're going to operate a plant like that and have leaks in the ceiling and bird droppings falling onto your peanuts, even if you have a pretty good food safety program, you're not going to be able to keep the contamination out of your product.

ACRES U.S.A. We've certainly seen over the years that the industrial approach to food production and distribution practically guarantees periodic lapses in public safety.

BENBROOK. Well, what's happened is, companies go through ups and downs, and sometimes they're in a down cycle or there's an operating division that's not doing well because there's not very good local management, or whatever. People stop paying attention to the details that are required to assure that food is safe. Food plants today produce so much food and impact so many products. There are 3,000 products that have been impacted so far by the peanut recall — 3,000 different products that include some peanut material that went through that plant. That's a pretty big chunk of the food supply that's been impacted by one plant. You'll see the same thing if you look at our beef recalls of late, where you're getting into millions of pounds at a time being recalled. The only way you could have that happen is to have these very large plants that produce a very substantial volume in one or two or three shifts. If you get some contamination in the equipment or somebody doesn't do something right and contamination gets into the plant for a period of time, you can have situations where hundreds or thousands of people end up getting sick as a result and the government has to recall literally millions of pounds of food to be destroyed. Pretty costly mistakes.

ACRES U.S.A. The impact of scale is amazing — a batch of hamburger with meat from hundreds of sources can go out to thousands of outlets in a matter of a few days. How does it connect to the other side of food industry aisle, so to speak?

BENBROOK. Let me talk about a contemporary example that would be close to the hearts of your readership. Will Brinton, who is an excellent microbiologist well-known to the organic community because he does a lot of work on compost, has published a paper in the *Journal of Food Protection,* and I've written about it for our newsletter. Will and his colleagues went around to almost a hundred compost manufacturing facilities in Washington, Oregon and California and took samples of ready-to-use, so-called finished compost and subjected it to a variety of tests for fecal coliform, *E. coli* O157:H7, listeria, salmonella and a few other standard microbiological assays. One of their striking findings is that the *E. coli* counts in large compost facilities — these are facilities producing 45,000 metric tons or more per year of compost — were a thousandfold higher than in the compost from the small facilities that produce less than 12,000 metric tons per year.

ACRES U.S.A. Did they look at why this was the case?

BENBROOK. The small facilities were using the more traditional windrows, they were turning the piles more thoroughly and regularly as they're supposed to, and they tended to be the ones that didn't cut short the curing period. So they were in fact selling microbiologically clean, stable, finished compost and there was almost no *E. coli* in it. But some of these large facilities that used the big static pile system and tried to turn it with a great big loader, they have so much volume that they weren't able to do it in a timely way, and they had much dirtier compost. This impact of scale plays out both at the tail end of the food system in the processing plants and manufacturing plants, but it also plays out in a similar way at the front end of the agricultural supply chain, in this case in operations that are making compost. Given the critical role of compost in supporting soil fertility and soil quality on organic farms, obviously the organic community cannot support and allow compost manufacturers to

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stay in business that are selling compost with live *E. coli* O157:H7 in it. That is not acceptable. It cannot be allowed to happen.

ACRES U.S.A. Doesn't it also raise the question of organic and conventional as parallel worlds that many people imagine do not really overlap much? Common sense says they do overlap, and you just gave a pretty good example of a way in which doing something on a big scale is not necessarily the best way. And it could impact people who are working at a smaller scale and trying to do things more sustainably.

"What's happening is that food illness outbreaks caused by the less scrupulous companies are imposing enormous losses on the rest of the industry."

BENBROOK. Let me state the general question: How does the agricultural system deal with sloppy managers and companies that want to cut corners to increase profits? This could apply to organic liquid fertilizers — you know about what's going on there. It could apply to compost manufacturers. It could apply to somebody running a peanut processing plant. It could apply to a hamburger factory, whatever. All the way across the food system. Unfortunately there are unscrupulous managers and people who just don't understand the importance of a disciplined focus on food safety. What's happening is that food illness outbreaks caused by the less scrupulous companies are imposing enormous losses on the rest of the industry.

ACRES U.S.A. For example?

BENBROOK. The most recent example would be the St. Paul salmonella outbreak supposedly caused by tomatoes. It had this enormous impact on fresh-market tomato producers for three or four months, and then the FDA and CDC finally figured out it was coming from peppers from Mexico. Just go back to the 2006 salmonella outbreak from California spinach from the Salinas valley — when FDA did that recall it was a national recall of all spinach. Right now all sectors of agriculture realize that their economic viability is intrinsically linked to the behavior and performance of the weakest companies in their sector, which are the companies that are most likely to bring about a high-visibility food-borne illness outbreak. A task force has been convened by the Organic Trade Association to deal with the liquid fertilizer situation, where a couple of companies were adulterating organic liquid fertilizers, spiking them in effect with ammonia sulfate because it's a lot cheaper than organically acceptable sources of nitrogen. This OTA task force is going to put together a set of recommendations on how the industry can police itself. Rest assured that process is going to cost everybody in the industry money, not just the unscrupulous operators but everybody. And it's going to cost the organic farmer money, too, because they're going to have to pay a little bit more for legitimate liquid organic fertilizers to support the work that's needed to weed out the unscrupulous operator. The same thing's going to happen with compost manufacturers. Somebody's going to have to establish a more rigorous testing program as well as regulations governing the composting process to assure that the vast majority of compost that's manufactured and sold to organic farmers is safe and stable, because today it's not. Maybe two-thirds of it is, but that isn't good enough because that other one-third is going to bite you in the ass.

ACRES U.S.A. And you're arguing that even a tiny fraction of a market, if somebody screws it up badly enough, can really blow up in everybody's face?

BENBROOK. Absolutely. The Peanut Corporation of America was a moderate-sized operator in a pretty big industry, but look how they've imposed costs. I've seen estimates of over a billion dollars already on the peanut industry as a whole.

ACRES U.S.A. They accounted for a small percentage of the peanut business?

BENBROOK. Exactly. Because of this hypersensitivity to food safety issues and because the government is getting better and better at picking up outbreaks — disease surveillance and our epidemiological abilities are steadily progressing — we're going to pick up more of the food safety outbreaks that occur in the next decade than we did in the past. Ironically, there actually may be fewer outbreaks, but because we're detecting more of them, it will seem like we're actually having more.

ACRES U.S.A. On another topic, as you move around the country and talk to people, are you noticing a change in the attitudes about genetic modification? We have more of it in our food than any other big, wealthy country, and at the same time it's not as controversial as it is in Europe, and the propaganda from the people who put it in the market was pretty successful at first.

BENBROOK. Oh, it's still successful today, incredibly successful. If you talk to people who don't know a lot about agriculture and the food system, but know *something*, they'd probably agree with the general statement that agricultural biotechnology has been the most important technological change in agriculture in the past decade or so. That viewpoint has been advanced by the biotech industry and its various supporters in academia, but it's certainly not a view that's universally held. I certainly don't agree with it. What the biotech industry has done in bringing farmers Roundup Ready plants and Bt corn and Bt cotton has been relatively minor advances in pest management options, if you will, for a couple of insect pests and weeds in a couple of crops. But it has accomplished relatively little in terms of really improving either the productivity or the profitability of corn and soybean production

in this country. It's certainly enriched a few corporations, but it has also almost completely diverted attention. There has been so much public and private sector money invested in genetic engineering as the source of innovation in agriculture that the benefits of agricultural biotechnology have been oversold. None of the really big breakthroughs proposed have come about. We don't have nitrogen-fixing corn, we don't have drought-tolerant crops, we don't have more nutritious foods to speak of. We have the ability to spray Roundup on two-thirds of the crop acres in the country. That's really good for the companies that sell glyphosate herbicide, but it hasn't done much for farmers. Farmers' costs of production have gone up very steeply in this last four or five year period. When crop prices ran up so much last year, farmers weren't complaining about high-priced seed and fertilizer nearly as much as they will be, as crop prices now return to more normal levels. Agricultural biotechnology has not delivered on its promises and it probably won't because it's a relatively difficult, costly technology and it does pose new risks. Notwithstanding the assurances from the biotech industry, the new science on genetically engineered foods and technology is not universally positive. There are questions of safety that we'll continue to wrestle with, and I certainly don't see rapid expansion of the number of crops that are genetically engineered.

ACRES U.S.A. There must be people at Monsanto and other companies who are hard-nosed, cold-eyed realists, and they know this thing is probably never going to live up to its billing. Do you think they've just made a tactical decision to keep these balls in the air as long as they can and make as much money as possible?

BENBROOK. Well, yes. Doesn't that make sense? Monsanto is amazingly profitable right now, and they've convinced farmers that it's OK to spend close to $100 an acre for corn seed. Can you imagine that? I mean, *a hundred dollars an acre* for corn seed? I'll bet you there are farmers 15 years ago that had $12 or $15 an acre in their seed. So if you used to pay $15 an acre and you're paying $100 now, that's $85 more per acre just for the seed. Now at, let's say, $3 per bushel, are today's genetically engineered varieties giving farmers 25 more bushels without any other costs? Of course not! They're not seeing increased yields at all. In the case of soybeans, there's pretty clear evidence that there's been a small yield drag all along with Roundup Ready soybeans. So it hasn't been a good deal for farmers. It simplified their lives a little bit, but it's shifted a significant chunk of the income associated with a bushel of corn from the farmer to the biotech companies.

ACRES U.S.A. Do you believe a depressed economy, which it looks like we're going to have for at least another year, is going to wreck that logic even more?

BENBROOK. I think you're going to start to see some significant resistance from farmers this crop season when they start to look at their inputs versus what they're going to make. But you've got to remember that the biotech industry has been very successful in getting control of the vast majority of the private seed business, so it's going to take quite a bit of time for alternatives to reach the market and chip away at the market share of Monsanto, Pioneer and Syngenta, the seed companies controlled by the major biotech and pesticide companies that account for around 90 percent market share now. You're not going to turn that around too quickly because there just aren't other companies out there with the capacity to grow enough quality seed to shift the majority of acres to non-GMO varieties. We've made genetically engineered seeds the most successful new technology by default. The biotech companies bought up all the seed companies that genetically engineered all the seed. Farmers can either buy it or not buy improved genetics, and it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

ACRES U.S.A. They bought the marketplace to guarantee their success. What did you think of the recent rebellion by a dozen scientists working at land grant colleges heavily funded by biotech?

BENBROOK. I think it was a bold and principled move. I was surprised but delighted to see that they were taking such a strong stand, and I'm glad that their statement has gotten attention. It's going to get more, too. There are several reporters working on stories about it.

ACRES U.S.A. Do you expect the GMO story will ever blossom in terms of public consciousness? Americans just aren't aware of what a big chunk of their food has this stuff in it, and they aren't aware of how deep these issues run.

BENBROOK. I guess I've stopped waiting because I don't think it's likely that anything is going to happen to bring these issues into the American psyche in the same way that they're in the psyche of the average European. Certainly some terrible tragedy could happen and people would start to pay attention, but I think it's unlikely at the level of the general consumer. What about farmers, though? Farmers are the ones buying these seeds, and it's their hard work that is supporting the profitability of this industry. I don't think things are going to change until farmers start to question whether they're getting a good deal or not. Has genetic engineering really improved their lot in life? Are they better off? I think more and more of them are starting to answer that question in the negative. The biotech industry has created a positive aura

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around this technology but that aura is really sustained mostly by men, not by facts, and as events in the real world chip away at the pillars of that aura I think that we're going to see farmers turn, some of them pretty harshly, against the industry. They will then spend their input dollars with another type of company, and that will start a return to a more diversified, democratic kind of an agricultural industry as opposed to this hierarchical food system that we seem to be heading toward now, where more and more control is consolidated in fewer hands as farmers wind up with less control and less money at the end of the day.

ACRES U.S.A. Would you agree that Enron and the real estate bubble show how events can turn 180 degrees at dizzying speeds?

BENBROOK. Absolutely, they can turn incredibly fast. Look at the volatility in the food markets in 2008. It just takes your breath away to look at a chart of corn prices that got up to $7.50 a bushel, it's really amazing.

ACRES U.S.A. If you were asked to come back to Washington and write something like a Farmers Bill of Rights, would you do it? Or is that even a good idea because the farmers who aren't huge always seem to get the blunt end of the stick?

BENBROOK. It's an important thing to do. Some group of people needs to start rebuilding the parts of both private business and organizational infrastructure that are required to support a more bottom-up, diversified, democratic food system that really treats farmers as full and equal partners whose interests need to be taken into account and given equal weight to the interests of agribusiness. It's way beyond time for that to happen, and I'm hopeful that some progress will be made in that direction in the next few years. This financial meltdown has woken a lot of people up to the fact that not everything is as it seems in our financial system, in our energy system, and in our food system. People like Michael Pollan have done a great service using the platform that he has in the *New York Times* and through his books to educate people about what's fundamentally wrong with our food system. I think the message is getting through, and as a result the depth of support for more significant changes in agricultural policy and everything that supports the agricultural sector is going to grow, and that's all for the good.

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ACRES U.S.A. What role does the Organic Center play? For people who aren't familiar with it, are you the founder?

BENBROOK. No, I didn't create it. I'm the one staff person that was there at the beginning and is still part of it. It's a very small organization. I'm basically the only staff member that's doing science and the technical work. I work with scientists around the country who are doing research in this area, but the center has very modest resources and an agenda, a mission, that is 10 or 100 times bigger than we have the ability to accomplish. I really wish there was a well-funded, capable and well-staffed organic center addressing and pushing ahead on all of the various science issues that are important as society makes choices about shaping the food system of the future. Do we want to just continue the current road and deal with the consequences, or do we want to try to go down some alternative paths? If the latter, then which ones and how? I'd like to see all the various areas of science and the reasons for doing that brought into the debate, but with a very small organization of one person it isn't going to happen.

ACRES U.S.A. It's interesting that the Organic Trade Association takes on the potentially expensive task force project you mentioned earlier instead of USDA's National Organic Program. Are you hearing any commotion about staffing up the organic office at the USDA so they could shoulder the regulatory burden?

BENBROOK. I think there's definitely going to be some growth, an upgrade, if you will, in the national organic programming at the USDA. I think the time has come for that to happen. That's going to make a big difference, because the National Organic Program has thus far kind of functioned with one hand tied behind its back. There really hasn't been any strong political support for organic in USDA, and indeed I think organic has had some strong critics inside the department ever since there was an NOP in USDA. With the election of President Obama and with Kathleen Merrigan getting the Deputy Secretary job, I think this is going to be the first time that there is strong unequivocal, unwavering support for the NOP and a constructive, positive role for USDA in the growth of the organic industry, and boy, it couldn't come at a better time.

ACRES U.S.A. Do you know Kathleen Merrigan? For people who aren't familiar with her background, what can you tell us about her?

BENBROOK. Yes, I know her very well. I actually met her and helped her when she came to Washington in the early '80s. She's been a personal and professional friend ever since. She'd been working on a graduate program at MIT, and she was getting ready to be out of college. She wanted to come to Washington and work in the agricultural area. Her initial job was with Pat Leahy in the Senate Ag committee. She was on the Senator's staff at the time the National Organic legislation was passed. It was passed in the 1990 farm bill, but Leahy was responsible for writing the legisla-

tion in 1988 and 1989, and that's when Kathleen was on his staff. She worked on the Hill through 1992, went back to MIT for a year or two, and then was brought into the Clinton administration with the administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service, where the National Organic Program is currently lodged. Kathleen was the administrator of the AMS for about the last three years of the Clinton presidency and did a great job. You know what her first issue was, and it literally broke on the weekend before she started work? Remember that Hunt's Point bribery scandal? There had been an undercover FBI sting operation, and there were kickbacks going on among USDA inspectors at this Hunt's Point terminal market, which is the main wholesale vegetable market there that serves the broader New York metropolitan area. It was one of the higher-visibility USDA scandals in modern history, and that's what she got thrown into on her first day as the administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service. She was *the* person. That stuff happened in her part of the agency, so she had to deal with all of it. Obviously she also helped shepherd the early stages of the National Organic Program. When the Clinton administration ended, she went back into academia, and she's been the director of the sustainable food systems program at Tufts.

ACRES U.S.A. Does she have qualities that give you real hope for what she can do?

BENBROOK. Oh, yeah. She knows how Washington works. She has a lot of close friends in Congress and in the White House that she can draw upon in helping make sure that good things happen and bad things don't. She's very well liked and respected, and she's strategic in her thinking. I think that Kathleen will pick her battles wisely, those that are both winnable and important to win. I think there's going to be a lot of change coming about in the next few years — positive change driven by USDA that's going to change a lot of attitudes about government.

Charles Benbrook's reports can be found at the Organic Center's website, *www.organiccenter.org*.