

The State of the Eco-Union

Where We've Been, Where We're Going, What We're Doing

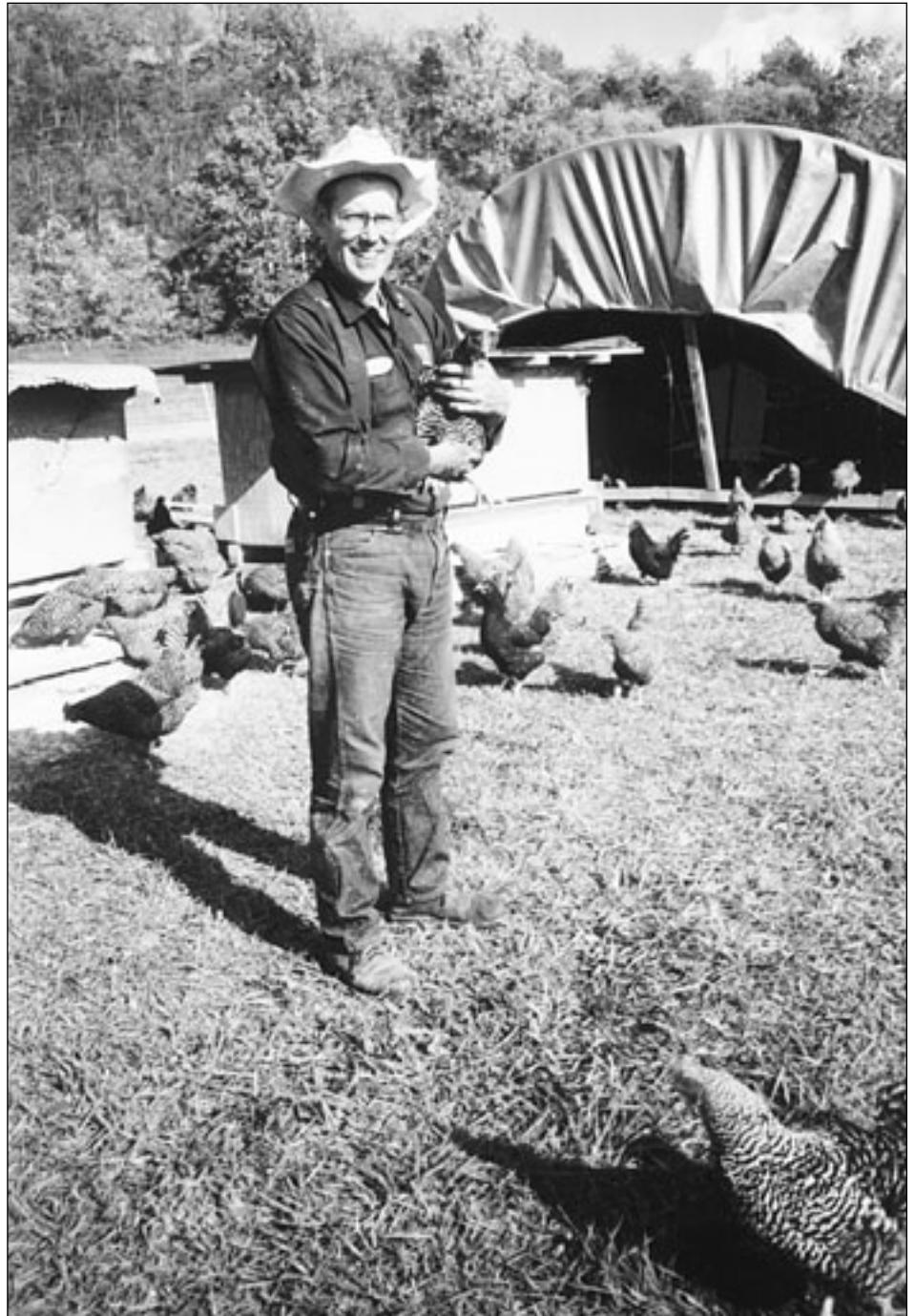
by Joel Salatin

A paradigm is a subconscious road map. It is how we view the world and is so deeply embedded that we don't even realize we have it. What organiculture, eco-agriculture, clean agriculture, organic farming, sustainable agriculture — whatever you call it — has done is to bring the world a new paradigm. We now are seeing the disequilibrium that occurs when two paradigms clash.

A new paradigm is represented by embryonic entities, the smallest viable aspect of any enterprise. An enormous oak tree reproduces by acorns because an embryonic entity has to be small enough to support itself with very little outside infrastructure. That's what we've been doing. There is a high variability in our prototypes as we work out research and development and learn how to proceed. Because it is an entrepreneurial niche, to recoup the research and development money, along with lack of competition, embryonic enterprises and new paradigms can enjoy huge price margins.

New paradigms come from evangelistic fervor, passion in the movement, pioneers and passionate practitioners. They are founded in a different value system from that of the overriding paradigm. They are highly decentralized. This decentralized aspect occurs in less than one-half percent market share, period. As paradigms access the market it takes as long to go from zero percent market share to one-half percent as it does from one-half to 2 percent, and as it does to go from 2 to 10 percent. Right now organics are at about the 2 percent level, and we are coming out of that period.

This paradigm has largely come out of an Eastern mindset rather than Western. It is an offshoot of the idea that we are all connected, that all of life is connected. This Eastern mindset is something that the Greco-Roman-Western reductionist, compartmentalized, fragmented linear, individualistic mindset does not know. The Eastern mind focuses on connected-



ness. It is interested in a reverence for life. In this mindset we actually begin to ask, "Does it matter if a pig can express its *pig-ness*? Does it matter if a chicken can express its *chicken-ness*? Why is the plow on the end of a pig's nose?" Those of us

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who came to the movement early were asking these questions.

Some might consider it “feminine” to ask these questions because they sound like nurturing, mother-type questions. Men, on the other hand, like to go out and smell the diesel and feel the pig iron under their thighs. The idea of going out and sitting on a stump to watch the turkeys pecking as we wonder, “Turkey, what would make you happy?” — come on, that’s not macho! We’re supposed to be redesigning the turkey. Men are not supposed to ask what makes an animal happy — the animals are simply objects for our use.

This mindset asks another question, which is about community. What about us and *we*? In the great agricultural economist lexicon, does it matter whether we have depopulated rural America? Does it matter whether imports displace all of our domestic production, and we buy at such cheap world prices that we eliminate wealth and people from the countryside? The Eastern mindset asks if there are moral and ethical parameters around human cleverness. Eco-farmers bring this mindset to the food system and ask, “Is there anything we *shouldn’t* do? Is anything off limits? Just because we *can* do it, *should* we?” These are relevant questions. We ask them because there are moral and ethical parameters inherent in allowing

nature to be the template for how we produce and how we operate.

New paradigms always bring artisanal models to the marketplace, models not easily reproduced. It is hard to duplicate the artisanal qualities of a potter working at his wheel, or an organic vintner who has made a distinctive wine. This fact protects the early prototype period from competition, precisely because these products are not easily duplicated and these new paradigms don’t register on the conventional radar.

Finally, this new paradigm is always entrepreneurial, small, prototypical and therefore very customer responsive. How many of us involved in direct marketing can look back and say that much of what we have done was in response to what our customers wanted? We are responsive because we are small, and thus there is close accountability and responsiveness between producer and consumer.

Today we are in the growth phase of this paradigm. That is the one-half to 2 percent that I mentioned earlier. We have been discovered by the government, and the government has certainly become involved. We have allowed its involvement through organic certification. In this respect, the critical element we have to understand when we discuss market para-

digms is this: organic certification has taken production out of the artisanal sector and created a definition of a system.

The definition of this type of system is the standardization of the product, which eliminates differentiation of that product. Study economics, look at any business manual, and you will notice that every time a new paradigm hits the market — remember, there were 1,500 automakers in 1912 — within 30 years there are only about two or three players. This is because the parameters become defined and established, the artisanal elements are eliminated, and then the product is easily duplicated by anybody who can buy the model.

I know that there are still plenty of artisanal elements to organics, but in the consumer’s eye, *organic* means one thing. You’ve got hardening of the categories, and that is the end of the discussion. That’s why on our farm we use the terms “salad bar beef” and “pigerator pork” instead of “organic,” because it stimulates discussion and education. When someone comes up, and you say, “I’ve got organic chicken,” they know what that means. This fact has created what I call the “Wall Streetification” of organics.

An empire by any other name is still an empire. You can call it biodynamic, organic, sustainable, but it is still an empire. The defining of organics is essentially the Westernization of the Eastern paradigm. Therein lies the significant dilemma that we currently face in organic agriculture, namely, raising something in the Eastern production mindset and trying to sell it

through a Western market paradigm. In my view, it is probably the single largest dilemma currently facing us. How do we sell a connected, communal, we-oriented, reverence-for-life appreciation through a Western mindset that is fragmented, compartmentalized, reductionist, linear, systematic and unconnected?

To tell you the truth, we probably can’t, not without losing the Eastern edge, the appreciation, reverence and the artisanal qualities that the Eastern model brought to the equation. What we will have is the commodification of organics. We already see businesses buying into organics. We are seeing centralization, takeover, and a complete Wall Streetification — values not shared by the pioneers.

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What are the red flags of this process? When you read a business report or you hear an executive director talk about market share, that's a red flag. So are patenting, trademarking and the attitude that "you can't come visit me because I've got trade secrets." The "I've got mine, you get yours" attitude that is very Western, that says we aren't family, is a red flag. People tell me, "You've been so free with

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your information." As long as the quality remains high and the production remains an artisanal product, I am not worried, because the information, passion and energy necessary to be a craftsman automatically limits competition. As soon as it is a duplicatable industrial commodity, anyone can do it. Market share and trade secret discussions are signals of our moving toward a Western business model.

Remember learning the physics that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction? For every new McDonald's, there is a new CSA. That is the exciting part of this. For every organic prototype that was taken over, another little community-based, direct-marketed prototype springs up. For every small business that joins the barcode craze, for every business that is bought out in the centralization of the organic commodity program, there are another one, two or three little community-based, direct-marketed, bioregional, artisanal outfits that start up. That's the balance that occurs.

Problems begin when people start asking for additional regulatory involvement. I can't figure out why those of us who realize that the government doesn't do many things well would nevertheless go to the government to protect our food supply and organics. As soon as you see people wanting more government involvement in any enterprise sector, you can be sure that those people are coming at it from a perspective that says, "I've got

mine, we're going to protect ours, and we're going to wine and dine the bureaucrats to make certain that we have no competition."

We are now at the stage of *minimizing*. The organic movement is trying to come to a "minimal standard" for everything. It is amazing when people find out the truth of what the new livestock standards, which require access to range, really mean. To the average consumer this is "home on the range," blue skies and wildlife. Not for Wall Streetified organics.

"Access to range" refers to an 11,000-bird layer house with a 30-by-30-foot corral next to it that the chickens can step out on. Instead of pushing to a maximum quality and artisanal designation, everything becomes minimalized as we move toward a commodity base. It's a pass/fail, what-can-we-do-just-to-get-by system. It does not ask, "How can I do the very best?"

As this system becomes larger, the products become less and less differentiated. One reason for this is that the major players are not the passionate pioneers, nor those who developed the prototypes. They are Harvard MBAs who have moved up to CEO status. They are looking at market share, profit line, profit margin and asking, "How can we do this as *efficiently* as possible?" The movement is becoming owned by Wall Street and Western ideas, with the result that it becomes less and less important to have a differentiated product.

There is increasing pressure from our foes as we start to make noise and enter the marketplace. They try everything from discrediting us to out-and-out assassination. This year in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, we had over 1,000 tractor-trailer loads of turkeys, primarily, but also a lot of broilers, destroyed due to avian influenza. How many of you heard about that? You'd think it would be national news, but it didn't even make the local news. It was kept very quiet.

What was the culprit? Sparrows and starlings were identified. And who do they get it from? Free-range chickens were blamed. So the bureaucrats decide, "Avian flu is going to destroy the poultry industry, and it is caused by free-range chickens." It never occurs to these bureaucrats that a better immune system on-farm improves health. I talked to two of the 200 federal veterinarians who administered

this program and its extermination of the 1,000 tractor-trailer loads of turkeys and broilers. Both of them said that every single vet on the task force agreed that there were too many chickens, too crowded in the houses, in too small a space, and *that* was the problem. But they both also told me that if anybody on that task force breathed something like that publicly, they'd be in a lot of trouble. So much for the truth.

Our belief was that the whole thing was a ruse, because it happened the day after the industry lost their Russian contracts. All the growers that I talked to said there was a bunch of hankypanky going on. It provides a nice way to adjust inventory. You have a little vial of avian flu, a moderate strain, kill off a bunch of chickens, let the taxpayers indemnify the owners – of course, the growers are not the owners of the birds, the indemnity goes to the industry. The taxpayers pick up the tab for \$200 million, the industry gets their inventory cleaned up because they lost a big market share but don't have to overrun their freezers, and everybody is cool.

The last thing we are seeing in the organic movement is that as it grows larger, it becomes less responsive to customer needs and consumer desires. It is less responsive to people clamoring for grass-based beef while the industry is still feed-lotting beef — certified, of course.

The industrial paradigm hasn't been sitting still. It has developed a new clever-

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ness coexisting within the prototyping of the organic movement. The industrial paradigm, which early practitioners fought by refusing herbicides and pesticides 30 years ago, now has created new things like the irradiation of foods — but they don't call it irradiation, they call it "cold pasteurization."

This year we have seen the largest tonnage of food recalled in any year of our nation's history. That is how efficient this industrial paradigm is. The spin says we need this industrial paradigm to feed the world — that's why we had to landfill 1,000 tractor-trailer loads of turkeys and 2 million pounds of ground beef from



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ConAgra. These recalls allow consumer fear to kick in and are used to support the idea that everybody must swallow mandatory irradiation in order to have a secure food supply.

There is genetic engineering, or what I call *genetic prostitution*. Genetic prostitution is supposed to save the world from everything. If you examine the justification for genetic engineering — the phraseology that it is going to heal disease, make us live longer, feed the world — that same group of phrases is pervasive in the 1950-55 yearbooks of agriculture applauding the merits of DDT and the organophosphate revolution. They were going to feed the world, help us all live longer, and cure diseases.

Global positioning satellites (GPS) have come a long way, and so has global marketing, especially through GATT and NAFTA. In fact, as a culture of Western technicians, we have become incredibly good at asking “how” without asking “why.” We have figured out how to plant, fertilize, chemicalize, and harvest corn with global positioning satellites, but no one is asking, “Why are we growing so much corn?” or “Why are we feeding cows, who are herbivores, grains?”

The problem as industry runs its whole race is that it becomes dehumanizing. Henry Ford was euphoric about the great factory, the interchangeable parts — and don’t get me wrong, there are some won-

derful things about that; I like my computer, my watch, my tractor — the problem is that there are limits. Henry Ford took people through his factory and said his only complaint was that he had to hire a whole man when all he needed was his hands. Does that sound like the kind of boss you would love to work for, someone who would take care of you all of the time?

There is a yearning in the human soul for heritage, and as you go to the technoglitzy, you start losing touch with what is real and important in life. You lose the elements of soul. You can only go so far before you begin to lose your moorings. We are now so “connected” that we have split-second communication with anyone on the globe. The only problem is that a split second is way too brief for some things, such as a handshake or a kiss. That is the balancing of the human element — the Eastern, the Western elements, and the technological.

Our culture has moved to a state of fear. Industrialization is a fearful thing. Any time you go out and build a huge megalithic machine, it’s a scary thing. Go sit in front of a 500-horsepower, turbocharged, four-wheel-drive, eight-tired articulated John Deere and tell me it is not a fearful thing. Fear now encompasses our culture and our society. Our own industrial cleverness has been turned against us.

Our culture has moved to pathogenic paranoia. We have become so disconnected from life and living things that we hate even the bacteria that sustain us. If it weren’t for the 3 trillion bacteria in my intestines, I wouldn’t be alive tomorrow. I had better eat food that feeds these critters. If I don’t, I am a dead man. This whole pathogen paranoia has been created by the industrial model.

One of the restaurants we used to sell to had a salmonella outbreak. The bureaucrats went in, confiscated some of our eggs, and claimed they were the problem. We quickly grabbed the eggs and sent them to Brookside Laboratory and paid a couple of hundred bucks — we even sent samples of the chicken manure from our farm — it all came back 100 percent clean, zero salmonella. We were waiting on pins and needles for the state cultures to come back. Finally, I got tired of waiting, called the inspector in charge, and asked what they found. She said, “We never cultured it.” I asked, why not? She said, “Culture doesn’t mean anything, it is just a point in time. That species of salmonella has been found in the past, in some cases, on eggs, so we just assumed it was from your eggs because they are unwashed.” If our eggs are not dirty, we don’t wash them because it preserves their bacterial film and keeps them fresher longer. We have customers who don’t want washed eggs. This inspector said, “As far as I am concerned an unwashed egg is inedible.” What do you think our culture would think if tomorrow’s headline hit the newspaper, “Local Health Inspector Accuses Local Restaurant of Using Inedible Eggs?” This is only meaningful if you put yourself in the shoes of the average American. We have been conditioned to believe that if you have got a degree or a government initial behind your name that you must be telling the truth. It is a sham and a facade — they are not telling the truth.

An interesting sidenote to that story occurred the very next day, when a friend who had just toured France called me up and was telling me about his trip. He said, “In France it is illegal to sell a washed

egg.” They figure an egg that needs to be washed is so dirty that it has to be pasteurized, because the shell is porous, and if you wash it, it is going to accept bits and pieces of the dirty exterior.

We are dealing with security paranoia. Our culture is willing to accept anything in the name of security. But there are a whole bunch of people out here that are beginning to distrust empires. If you read *Trends 2000*, or any book predicting future trends, such as Faith Popcorn’s *Clicking*, you’ll learn that one of the hottest trends directing the next 20-year market cycle is the fact that nobody trusts the government anymore. Nobody trusts anything big. Nobody trusts Enron, nobody trusts Tyson, and these people *know* that nobody trusts them. The best way to return trust to bureaucracies and conglomerates is to create cultural paranoia and create people who desire security at any cost.

While this is going on, we have entered the information-based economy where the buzzwords are *downsized*, *outsourced*, *restructured* and *miniaturized*. Forty years ago the average person got out of high school and worked for the same company all of his life. Today the average high school graduate will work for 15 employers in his lifetime. The fastest-growing business trend in the country is the cottage industry. Home business is supposedly going to employ 50 percent of all of the people in the country in the next five to six years because of the information explosion. This economy allows you to be any place. We spent 100 years depopulating the countryside so that people could punch timeclocks at the factory. In the information economy, as long as you are uplinked, your office can be on a Bermuda beach or in a tree in the middle of Colorado. You don’t have to be in a place, you can be in a space.

It is a little-known fact that in 1900 the single biggest problem facing every metropolis in the country was mountains of horse dung. What is amazing is that the things we fear the most become the least fearful as soon as our cleverness solves them. Never underestimate the ability of people to solve problems — that’s why I am not a pessimist.

In view of all of this, I think it is exciting that we are the information-based part of the food system. Agriculture was the last part of the information economy to

develop. Agriculture, being a conservative element of society, is always the plodder. We tend to be conservative and are not enamored of the new and glitzy. Agriculture was the last sector of the economy to join the Industrial Revolution, and it will be the last to exit. The eco-farm is the ultimate information-based food

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system, capitalizing on everything high-tech married to heritage wisdom.

We could assemble a group of scientists who work on the space shuttle, and they could explain the workings of every instrument, the physics and reasons behind every thing on the space shuttle. But can anybody tell me why an earthworm turns left instead of right? Nobody can do it. When we respect heritage wisdom, we are drawing on true information and not pseudo information. What we’ve got right now is a bunch of high-powered ivory tower professors telling us that they’ve found the answers to all of the problems.

The situation they’ve created is just like that of the earls and lords in the castles who thought they had created the ultimate security for themselves — in a castle with a moat, horses, labor to grow enough oats to feed the horses, enough metallurgy that a knight could move in armor, and a lance that was good enough carry the ultimate impregnable war machine. Ironically, they were less than 20 years from being obsolete, with the invention of gunpowder. When they cry, “We’re secure,” they have usually reached the point of insecurity.

Those of us in the true information-based economy have married the best of technology to our farms. We have gone from *mass* to *information*. The optimum size of everything is getting smaller, and it is time that IBP and Excel and Tyson and Purdue learn that you and I are the gunpowder, while they are in the castle think-

ing they are secure. We are going to march through the fragments of those castle walls as the security system breaks down from its own weight and its own obsolescence.

We have the answers with grass-based herbivores. Quit feeding corn, and we don’t have to deal with *E. coli*. Pasture-based poultry equals no salmonella. Portable structures, infrastructures, hoop houses, electro-netting — you can take this high-tech netting, and you can go out and put up a 150-foot fence that is impregnable to coyotes but only weighs 10 pounds — you can carry it in one hand, all of it is high-tech married to heritage wisdom and allows the animals to fully express their distinctiveness. My point is that today, by marrying high-tech to heritage wisdom — instead of taking high-tech and running off into the blue, as irradiation and genetic engineering do — we can actually produce more food that is better in every way today than we could 100 years ago.

We must dedicate ourselves to protecting the freedom to transition our food system into the information-based, restorative economy. This economy is a system that is local, appropriately sized, enhances the habitats of plants and animals, and it has accountability. There is a direct relationship between producer and consumer.

Our customers are coming to us in the countryside. Why are we certifying organic California tomatoes to be sold in New York City in January? What we should do is teach the folks in New York how to rediscover their kitchens and preserve, can, freeze, solar dry and utilize the tons of tomatoes that local organic producers dump in their backyards in late August. That will lead to a system that really lasts, and it will take care of people who move into the countryside and ask me, “Does a chicken lay an egg without a rooster?”

We don’t need more grants, we need more guts to do the right thing, to stand up to the bureaucrats who throw a big book at us and say, “It says so right *here*.” We need to ask them, “*Where* does it say that?” The codes are so thick and so sub-

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jective that nobody knows what they mean, and nobody will sign off on them.

We need more passion to be willing to draw a line in the sand and say, "This is enough — our food is better!" All chicken is not the same, nor are all peppers. There are major differences — nutritional differences, bacteriological differences, pathogenic differences. There are ecological and economic differences. We do not need more research, we need the reason to implement what we learn on our farms. We don't need more research that figures out how to irradiate chickens or gene-splice a corn plant. We need thinking and reason to figure out what we already have, because our problem is that the human mind is clever enough to outrun our own headlights.

We do not need more laws, we need more liberty. We need to protect freedom of choice. We need to protect the freedom of the farmer to sell and the freedom of the consumer to purchase anything they jolly well want without the encroachment of harrassing, capricious, asinine government regulations. If we don't preserve that liberty today, the only thing our children and our children's children will be able to have and eat is irradiated, amalgamated, extruded, reconstituted, chlorinated, genetically prostituted, ADM fecal soup. I am convinced that the freedom to eat our choice of foods will be one of the show-downs of tomorrow.

We don't need more federalism, we need more freedom. We don't need more security, we need more sense. Finally, we don't need more fear, we need more faith

in the way the Creator designed nature and set the principles in motion. Nature is still the most beautiful, fearfully and wonderfully made design ever invented, and it cannot be abridged, adulterated, compromised or improved upon by human arrogance or cleverness.

Joel Salatin raises grass-fed beef, pastured poultry, rabbits and more on a model diversified farmstead, Polyface Farm, in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. He is the author of Salad Bar Beef, Pastured Poultry Profits, You Can Farm, and Family Friendly Farming, each available from Acres U.S.A. for \$30, plus shipping and handling. To order, call 1-800-355-5313 or visit our website at <www.acresusa.com>.

The Salatin family will be hosting two sessions of two-day Intensive Discovery Seminars at Polyface Farm this summer — July 11-12, 2003, and July 25-26, 2003.

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