Embracing a New Era

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

Can food cooperatives better serve communities and thrive in a declining economy? What growth strategies will work to significantly expand co-op market share? And how does organic agriculture address global issues?

"Recession shopping" is only a beginning. In most communities, food cooperatives and co-op members face an increasingly difficult economic landscape. Past and current efforts to strengthen business and social capacity and to prepare our organizations will be tested by strong food inflation (presently over 5 percent) and energy inflation (natural gas as well as oil). Most cities are poorly prepared, with the exception of those that have embraced an overriding goal of reduced carbon emissions, including support of organic farming.

In 1977 President Carter warned that the U.S. faced a national catastrophe unless it embarked on serious conservation efforts and reduced its use of oil and natural gas. This warning was ignored, and the catastrophe is now visibly unfolding. Global warming trends make the full cost of fossil fuel energy even higher, and the lack of functioning alternative sources will make the transition very difficult.

The decline stems both from the onset of peak production of fossil fuels and from unmanageable and unrecoverable debt. Debt is at new heights, burdening households and propping up a dollar that is losing its international position.

Domestically, solutions are handicapped by wealth-oriented public policy and weak political will. The prospect of reliable public services is now less certain, with shrunken revenues adding to over-budget energy costs. On July 29, New York Governor David Paterson, addressing his constituents, said, "The fact is, we confront harsh times. Let me be honest, this situation will get worse before it gets better." New York, with revenues significantly dependent on Wall Street incomes, is feeling the squeeze earlier than some states.

Recognizing and planning for limits to energy supply continues to meet much resistance. Although demand for fuels is up while the global supply is flat or declining, many politicians and commentators continue to point the finger at other factors. Outside of where a local disaster has occurred, much of the public continues to expect a return to "normal," thereby diminishing our chances of timely adaptation.

Education is key, and cooperatives can play a major role in local efforts. Ignoring false assurances that "recovery is around the corner," community leaders need to step up. They can address conservation and a future that promises changes likely to be greater and more difficult than anything seen in our lifetimes. Reducing carbon emission by more than half of present levels—voluntarily or not—is necessary for our survival.

The cliché that "all politics is local" will acquire greater weight as national and regional programs and infrastructure falter. Local communities will have to garner resources for emergency responses and new ventures.

Here is Wendell Berry on "this economy of community destruction":

> "The general reaction to the apparent end of the era of cheap fossil fuel, as to other readily foreseeable curtailments, has been to delay any sort of reckoning. The strategies of delay have been a sort of willed oblivion, or visions of large profits to the manufacturers of such 'biofuels' as ethanol from corn or switchgrass, or the familiar unscientific faith that 'science will find an answer.' The dominant response, in short, is a dogged belief that what we call the American Way of Life will prove somehow indestructible. We will keep on consuming, spending, wasting, and driving, as before, at any cost to anything and everybody but ourselves.
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> "…Our national faith so far has been: 'There's always more.' Our true religion is a sort of autistic industrialism. People of intelligence and ability seem now to be genuinely embarrassed by any solution to any problem that does not involve high technology, a great expenditure of energy, or a big machine.…It is this economy of community destruction that, wittingly or unwittingly, most scientists and technicians have served for the past two hundred years. These scientists and technicians have justified themselves by the proposition that they are the vanguard of progress, enlarging human knowledge and power, and thus they have romanticized both themselves and the predatory enterprises that they have served.
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> "…And so, in confronting the phenomenon of 'peak oil,' we are really confronting the end of our customary delusion of 'more.' Whichever way we turn, from now on, we are going to find a limit beyond which there will be no more. To hit these limits at top speed is not a rational choice. To start slowing down, with the idea of avoiding catastrophe, is a rational choice, and a viable one if we can recover the necessary political sanity. Of course it makes sense to consider alternative energy sources, provided they make sense. But we will have to re-examine the economic structures of our lives, and conform them to the tolerances and limits of our earthly places. Where there is no more, our one choice is to make the most and the best of what we have."

Can cooperatives continue to grow in such an environment? Will organic agriculture be recognized for its potential to address global challenges? The reports in this edition's "Food Crisis" section provide some ideas and a framework for considering our future. ■