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AGRICULTURAL  
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## Book reviews

### Agricultural economics compact disk

*AGECONCD*. Produced by CAB International; distributed by Silver Platter. Silver Platter Information, Norwood, MA. US\$ 5000 for the retrospective, covering 1973 – present, plus US\$ 1400 per year for quarterly updates. Retrospective contains 240 000 + records, with 14 000 + records added annually. Available for PC, Windows, and Macintosh formats.

*AGECONCD* is a bibliographic database on CD-ROM published by CAB International. The database covers agricultural economics, rural development, forest economics, environmental economics, food policy, the food industry, international trade, finance and credit, farm economics, education, extension and research and rural sociology. It contains all relevant records from the CAB Abstracts database, including journal articles, monographs, conferences, working papers and annual reports from more than 100 countries. Approximately 12 000 new records are added to the *AGECONCD* database each year. Updates are produced quarterly, and there is a retrospective disc covering the years 1973 to 1992 that contains over 200 000 records. All records have complete bibliographic information, and most entries have lengthy English abstracts. The cost is rather high for the retrospective disc, US\$ 5000, but the quarterly updates are more reasonable at US\$ 1400 per year.

The CAB International document delivery service can supply photocopies of most articles abstracted in *AGECONCD*, subject to copyright regulations. Requests may be placed by post, electronic mail, telex or fax. The cost is the same for each article, regardless of length, depending

on the method of delivery US\$ 14 for delivery by post or US\$ 33 for delivery by fax.

*AGECONCD* is distributed by Silver Platter and uses Silver Platter's SPIRS software for search software. This software is very user friendly, easy to use and menu driven. It is used on all Silver Platter discs, so if you have searched one Silver Platter database, you can search any of them. In each record, all fields are searchable, and the search terms that you select are underlined so you can easily see in which fields they occurred. A record can be printed out either as a full record or in an abbreviated citation form.

CD-ROM technology saves time, lots of time, and therefore this database is invaluable for literature searches and current awareness services in the fields that it covers. Instead of tracking numerous journals as well as conference reports and working papers, searching *AGECONCD* will do that for you in a fraction of the time and in a more comprehensive and thorough manner. *AGECONCD* is subject specific and current. It is especially good for covering "grey literature" and literature from third world countries. It has depth as well as breadth in the subject areas that it encompasses. Its only disadvantages are the cost of the retrospective disc and the difficulty and expense involved in obtaining materials once you have found the citations. Because much of the material cited is from more obscure sources, it is more difficult to acquire.

If you have a good library at hand which can do interlibrary loans for you, the difficulty in obtaining materials can be more easily overcome. If you do not have major budgetary constraints, the materials can always be easily obtained from CAB International. It would be useful to compare

*AGECONCD* with *AGRICOLA*, the database of the National Agricultural Library (NAL) which is also on CD-ROM. The *AGRICOLA* database, also distributed by Silver Platter, is on four discs, three retrospective discs covering 1970 to 1991 and one disc covering 1992 to the present. It contains over 3 million records with 100 000 new records added annually. In contrast, *AGECONCD* is on two discs, one retrospective disc covering 1973 to 1992 and a second disc covering 1993 to the present. The *AGECONCD* database contains over 200 000 records with 1200 new records being added annually.

The subject coverage of *AGRICOLA* is quite extensive and oriented more toward the scientific than *AGECONCD*. *AGRICOLA* covers everything from agriculture to botany, entomology, horticulture, nutrition, parasitology, veterinary medicine and animal culture, to name a few. It is also easier to obtain materials contained in the *AGRICOLA* database. Most records list an NAL call number and the material can be obtained directly from NAL on interlibrary loan. NAL will lend most monographs and research reports (except for conference proceedings and edited books) free of charge. They charge by the page for photocopying, US\$ 5 for the first ten pages and US\$ 3 for every ten pages after that up to 50 pages, which is their copying limit. The cost of the discs themselves is also less expensive than *AGECONCD*, at US\$ 1 675 for the retrospective discs and US\$ 825 for the annual subscription, with new discs issued quarterly. Its one drawback is that, unlike *AGECONCD*, most of its records do not contain abstracts, which are very useful for determining relevance in a literature search.

All things considered, I still recommend purchasing *AGECONCD* to any library that covers the subject areas of agricultural economics, rural development, environment, forestry, trade and any of the other subjects mentioned in the first paragraph. The subject coverage in *AGECONCD* is different from *AGRICOLA* and while the cost of the retrospective disc might be difficult for a small library's budget, the savings in time and the access to knowledge that it produces is well worth the expense. Silver Platter does allow you a thirty day trial to test their databases, and once your

researchers have tried them, they will not be able to do research without them. My suggestion is to try both *AGECONCD* and *AGRICOLA* on a trial basis to determine which database covers your areas of interest more extensively. Like me, you will probably want to purchase both databases if your library budget will allow it.

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### The emerging global food system

*The Emerging Global Food System*. Gerald E. Gaull, Ray A. Goldberg et al. Wiley, Sussex, 1993, xii + 252 pp., US\$81. ISBN 0-471-5907-2.

The *Emerging Global Food System* is not, as the title would lead one to expect, a comprehensive and balanced exposition of the evolution of the world food economy based on historical perspective, nor an objective analysis of the present and forecast of the future. Instead, it is something much more interesting and insightful — the detailed report of the interchange (and at times, intensely emotional disagreement) that occurred during the second Ceres Conference of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), 30 October – 1 November 1991.

Unlike many conferences that bring together observers and students of a system, the 35 contributors to this book are among those in positions to significantly influence the system and are important components of the system. The contributors include: Carol C. Adelman, Charles J. Arntzen, Roger Blobaum, D. Allan Bromley, George E. Brown, Jr., John J. Cohrssen, Barbara J. Culliten, Bernard D. Davies, John T. Dunlop, Gerald E. Gaull, Ray A. Goldberg, Ellen Haas, John Higginson, Caroline Jackson, Robert Jackson, Arthur Kornberg, Arnold G. Langbo, Sanford A. Miller, Dorothy Nelkin, Charles R. Nesson, Andrzej Olechowski, Roger B. Porter, Jeremy Rifkin, William Ruder, Roger Salquist, Josef S. Schell, Jonathan F. Taylor, Harry E. Teasley Jr.,

Gerald J. Trant, Ryuichiro Tsugawa, Earl Ubell, Thomas N. Urban, Kees A. Van der Heijden, Hermann Von Bertrob, and John F. Woodhouse.

A somewhat loose grouping of contributors according to positions held resulted in the following distribution among areas of interest: legal, 2; environment and consumer interest, 3; the press and public relations, 3; medicine/health, 4; legislators/policy advisors/regulators, 6; bio science, 4; and agribusiness, 6 with 4 being downstream (processing, distribution and marketing) and 2 upstream (in pharmaceutical development). While the editors make no claim that contributors are representative of the emerging global food system, the mix of participants does reflect the general lack of concern about whether the system can produce food to meet future demand. There is no representation of producer interest, little presence of traditional agricultural production sciences, little presence of traditional input supply, little or no emphasis on traditional farm policy.

The book is organized around six topics; Part VII is a presentation of the editors' conclusions. Part I consists of five chapters treating various aspects of the role of new technologies in changing the global food system; it focuses heavily on biotechnology. Part II treats regulation in the food system through an interesting comparison of approaches to food policy in the United States and the European Community, followed by a chapter focused on food regulation and one on regulation of biotech products. Part III, entitled "International and Transnational Food Issues", comprises six chapters dealing with six largely unrelated topics (both to one another and to the rest of the book). Part IV consists of an introductory paper on "Diet and Cancer: The Politics of Risk Communication", followed by a chapter giving an historical scientific perspective on nutrition and cancer, and a chapter in which Ellen Haas presents "A Consumer Advocate Perspective" on diet risk communication.

Part V treats risk management and risk perception. There are two papers; one on food safety and risk assessment and management by D. Allan Bromley, then Assistant to the President (of the United States) for Science and Technology, and

one on regulatory implications of the new genetics by Dr. Davies of Harvard Medical School. Dr. Davies compares genetically engineered organisms and naturally occurring mutants in the evolutionary process in terms of the remote probability of monster organisms taking over the world. Part VI comprises four chapters giving the industry perspectives on the food system, again focusing mainly on regulation. The real jewel of the book is Part V, Chapter 18, "Adam's Apple: A Public Policy Panel on Food Safety". This is a virtually direct transcript of a 90 min panel during which the participants play their accustomed, real-life roles in a hypothetical case of the introduction of a genetically-altered apple. This unrehearsed exercise captures in very real and dramatic form essentially all of the issues on which the Conference focused, and vividly reflects the range of interests, concerns, frustrations, problems and emotions characterizing the changes taking place in the food system. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

The format of the book is to present papers, followed by what appears to be a near verbatim account of the follow-up discussion. The formal papers are quite variable in all dimensions, but, are pretty much in the mold of overview papers intended as discussion openers. The real contribution of the book for most readers will most likely come from the recorded discussion. The latter reveals the tension, suspicion, difference of perspective, and difficulty in communicating among the different parties central to core policy debates shaping the world food system. While the titles of the various parts of the book indicate a rather diverse set of issues shaping the emerging food system, the pervasive issue in both the papers and the discussion is the appropriate role of government in ensuring that the food supply is safe and healthy, and that technology, especially biotechnology, is safe for consumers and the environment. The arguments and perspectives of the various actors (government, consumers and their advocates, scientists, the press and industry officials) are not new. What is different, and thus what makes this book enjoyable and useful, is that the actors interact, in a way that can be clearly seen throughout the book, sometimes with

great emotion, and usually with great conviction. The differences of perspective and difficulty in agreeing are discouraging. Yet, the better understanding, communication, and even common interest that emerged during two days of intensive interaction are encouraging.

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### **Sustainable agriculture in the American midwest**

*Sustainable Agriculture in the American Midwest: Lessons from the Past, Prospects for the Future.*  
 Gregory McIsaac and William R. Edwards (Editors), University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL, Chicago, IL, 1994, 291 pp., US\$32.95. ISBN 0-2520-21 00-2.

The concepts of sustainability and sustainable agriculture are infuriatingly vague. Despite an apparent consensus that they must be important, there is no agreement on how they are to be defined or characterized. Sustainability enthusiasts increasingly seem to wish to avoid the entire issue of definition. For example, in a useful introductory chapter on sustainable agriculture in this volume, Gregory McIsaac, an agricultural engineer, argues that “the vague, subjective and elusive nature of sustainability need not deter society from pursuing the goal” (p. 27). He notes that we have other ill-defined goals, the pursuit of which requires tolerance and the recognition that there are many ways to accomplish particular purposes. He seems to suggest that such an approach would be more productive than endless debates over the scope and limits of sustainable agriculture.

If this book is any guide, however, the result of following such a broadminded procedure is less than impressive. With no consistent framework to guide them in their reflections on sustainable agriculture, most of the contributors to this volume end up writing from their own reductionist, disciplinary perspectives, producing a set of read-

ings that are often contradictory and bound by narrow, disciplinary parameters. More importantly, the apparent tolerance for different approaches leaves unarticulated, and therefore uncriticized, a particular intellectual bias that underlies many of the contributions. This bias sees modern, individualistic systems of production and distribution as bad or unsustainable, while traditional and unconventional systems (e.g. the Amish, who appear frequently to great accolades throughout the book) are virtuous and sustainable. Readers with different biases, or who wish to subject the implicit assumptions underlying this anti-modernist and communitarian outlook to scrutiny, may object.

The book includes twelve chapters originally presented at a seminar series held at the University of Illinois. Included among the 13 authors, most from the University of Illinois, are two economists and two anthropologists along with scholars in agronomy, entomology, engineering, geography, biology and ecology. The topics covered range from land drainage to integrated pest management and from indigenous knowledge to global climate change. Many of these chapters include some historical background in line with the book's objective of exploring the past to discover lessons that might be useful in the design of sustainable systems for the future. As with any edited book, the quality of the chapters is highly variable, with some that are fairly interesting and others that are not. In addition to the expected variation in quality, the book also suffers from several defects inherent in its underlying approach. The first of these, as noted above, is the incoherence of reductionist accounts that often seem to have little to do with each other or, in some cases, with the topic of sustainable agriculture itself. For example, Kenneth Olson, an agronomist, offers a discussion that amounts to a primer on the causes of soil erosion and an overview of efforts to control it. This is not entirely uninteresting, although those with some knowledge of agriculture will find nothing new here.

More importantly, the chapter does not situate soil erosion in the broader social, economic, and physical contexts that presumably are of some

relevance in examining sustainable agriculture. It reads like a chapter from an introductory textbook on soils rather than from a book on sustainable agriculture. Similar criticisms apply to most of the other chapters as well.

The lack of coherence between the various chapters leads to a number of logical and factual conflicts in the book. For example, in a chapter on the management of insects and other pests, Richard Weinzierl, an entomologist, characterizes early insect control methods as “primitive” (p. 167) and sees great benefits from the application of modern science to the problem of pests. This is in direct conflict with the story Dennis Warren, an anthropologist, wishes to tell us about the wonders of indigenous knowledge and the evils of everything that is modern. Locked in their disciplines, the authors fail to communicate with each other and also fail in the goal articulated in the introduction of discovering “... some common ground from which diverse constituencies could build a comprehensive understanding and definition of sustainability” (p. 4).

I doubt that the readers of this journal will find much that is of interest in this book. Because the chapters are written for non-specialists, there

is little that will be new to agricultural economists, even in the chapters devoted to the more technical and biological aspects of agriculture. In addition, the international dimension of sustainability is largely missing because of the focus on agriculture in the central parts of the United States. There are interesting chapters on the history of land drainage in these areas, the history of pest management, and climate change. Other chapters may appeal to readers with interests in particular topics such as the production of biomass for energy, or the interaction of agriculture and wildlife in the American midwest, although I found most of these chapters to be poorly written, weakly argued, and factually inaccurate. The book might be used as a source of readings in an introductory course on sustainable agriculture, although there must be better sources for this purpose. I recommend using the \$35.95 that this book costs for some other purpose.

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