

## **Organic agriculture in Belarus - Does such thing exist?**



### **The eco-group Foundation of Realization of Ideas (FRI) is trying to address the issue**

Environmentalists are concerned about eutrophication and persistent organic compounds (POPs) in the Baltic Sea. River pollution with fertilizers and pesticides caused by agricultural activities is the core part of the problem. About 45% of the total river flow from the territory of Belarus is coming into the Baltic Sea. Four rivers basins West Dvina, Neman, Vilia and Western Bug cover about 40% of the Belarus total country area of which about 30%, or 9 million ha, is agricultural land.

About 80% of Belarus agricultural sector are state owned collective farms. The Rural Development State Programme for 2005-2010 endorsed by the President about two years ago is mainly focused on intensive agriculture and includes targets for the productivity growth by increasing inputs of various pesticides and fertilizers.

What is known about organic, or eco-farming in Belarus? Although the term organic farming is in use, Eugeni Lobanov, leader of FRI, says and organic farming is included in the country Sustainable Development Strategy endorsed by the Government, very few are aware of that and there is a very little evidence of organic farming developments in Belarus.

Apparently, state owned collective farms are not ready to discuss on organic farming, Eugeny Lobanov says. They are under pressure to deliver the government production targets for meat, dairy and cereals. Most of them are not even getting sufficient subsidies from the state to pay taxes, loan repayments and bills for electricity, fertilizers and fuel.

Private farmers and individuals could've perhaps been more interested in organic farming, simply because they like to eat high quality fruit and vegetables and wish to use their pieces of land, plots and gardens sustainably by preserving fertility of soil. But in practice it is not that straightforward and getting rather more complicated. In fact private farmers in Belarus are not allowed to own the land. According to the Belarus Land Code all agricultural lands are the state property. The only option for a private farmer is to rent the land, but no more than 100 hectares. According to the government statistics in 2004 there was about 1.7% of the total agricultural land area rented by private farmers.

The lowest standard annual interest rate in Belarus a private farmer can get for a loan is about 12%. With the compulsory insurance, other charges and inflation it can reach 20-30% which pushes the price for organic produce high above the competitive levels on the internal market. International market could be a good option for Belarus private farmers, but all agricultural exports are the state monopoly.

Despite the restrictions there are dedicated enthusiasts of organic farming in Belarus. In 2006 a NGO called "Women for the Revival of the Narotchansky District"(Komarovo village, Minsk Oblast) began the initiative to develop organic farming in the Narochansky National Park. The plans are to run a pilot organic project using about 20 ha of land, to develop organic farming best practices and provide training in organic farming.

Another group of enthusiasts is led by scientists from the Grodno Agricultural

University. They organized and run a small organic farm in the “Nadezhda” Rehabilitation Centre for Children from Chernobyl (Vilia district, Minsk Oblast). The several years’ experience was summarised in the book by S. Tarasenko and A. Sviridov “Practice of organic farming in the Republic of Belarus”. The book provides details of organic farming approach, methodologies and standards. There is also an economic analysis in the book which confirms that the costs of the organic produce in “Nadezhda” farm is still a bit higher than the cost of similar produce from the nearby farms which do not do organic farming.

FRI is planning to organize a National Organic Farming Round Table that will involve scientists, farmers and government agencies. Government involvement is the key, Eugeni Lobanov says, to the development of organic agriculture in Belarus.

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