

Delegation From Middle East Trades Ideas About Food Economies

by June Pichel Cook

CRAFTSBURY—After touring Sterling College farms last week in a sleeting rain, five delegates from the Middle East and North African coast were feted to a Thanksgiving noontime feast of home-grown turkey and vegetables. They toured the area and exchanged ideas on food security and production, long-term and short-term agricultural systems, large- and small-scale farming, and GMOs and biodiversity.

The delegation, sponsored through the International Visitor Leadership Program under the auspices of the U.S. State Department, will continue to different areas of the United States. They came from Mauritania in North Africa, Kuwait,

Yemen, Iraq, and the Gaza Strip. Although climate, growing conditions, and agricultural practices are quite different from the Northeast Kingdom, the issues of feeding the hungry and balancing food security with sustainable agricultural practices and food distribution are universal, long-term and short-term.

Sterling College vice president Ned Houston emphasized students are educated in understanding long-term food systems, soil fertility, and sustainable agriculture and learn to combine ground-level practicality with scientific knowledge. The diverse perspectives on food security and production, and what it means, were evident among the delegates,

Sterling students and faculty, and community representatives.

Houston said, "We are training people to use their hands; and when they go to work, they understand both the farmer and the science. We think we need to move to a sustainable model of food production."

Elena Gustavson, of the Center for an Agricultural Economy, explained Vermont's short growing season is extended through greenhouses, which has peripheral positive effects of longer employment for workers and producing fresh food for consumers.

In a humorous comment, the Kuwait delegate said Vermont and Kuwait growers faced similar problems with short growing seasons:

Vermont farmers heat greenhouses for six months, and Kuwait growers air-condition greenhouses for six months to extend the season. He said they could benefit from the experiences of growing produce in greenhouses.

The delegate from Mauritania emphasized food availability and lack of local food production were major issues. He said 70 to 80 percent of the country has a desert climate. The logistical problems of food production, such as, the energy costs for irrigation, make it cheaper to "buy than to grow." He represented an organization that helps 30 to 40 percent of the population with basic food staples.

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In both Mauritania and Yemen, the problems of diminished food supplies, feeding the hungry, and malnourishment were immediate issues, whereas delegates from Kuwait and Iraq expressed interest in more theoretical agricultural and academic issues.

Gustavson noted the challenge is looking at long-term systems and feeding families 20 years from now versus the immediate needs in facing child hunger now. Gleaning activities by the Vermont Food Bank, getting fresh foods to people then educating them on its preparation, and obesity among impoverished people appeared to be as foreign to the delegates as the Vermont weather.

Lack of water and climate conditions were cited as major obstacles by the delegates. In Kuwait, recycled water is used but cannot meet the demands of agricultural needs. Imported grain, produced from GMO

seed, was a concern with its unknown long-term effects. He noted that growing organic foods was a new phenomenon.

The Yemen delegate said she works with rural women on both agricultural practices and animal husbandry, ranging from caring and feeding animals to planting vegetables. She said lack of food security in her country is alarming; many families face chronic famine. Women care for 99 percent of the livestock in the country and 75 percent of the agriculture is done by women.

She works with rural women because "if you have an aware woman in the house, the rest of the family will be aware too."

Eli Harrington, director of the International Visitor Program through the Vermont Council on World Affairs, arranged the tour of local farms and the college. The visitors were curious about Sterling and the role it plays in helping farmers to solve problems the majors offered, and follow up after students graduate.