The farming season is well underway and so is the NorthEast Organic Network. NEON is an innovative consortium of farmers, researchers, extension educators and organic farming organizations working together to improve organic farmers' access to research and technical support. As a core project, NEON is conducting multidisciplinary, on-farm studies of eleven exemplary organic farms, from Maine to Maryland and west into New York and Pennsylvania, to portray the difference of organic farming and the difference it makes.

NEON researchers are also developing decision support tools to improve organic farm management. These include a rotational planner to illustrate ways to use crop rotations, crop diversity and cover crops to reduce the severity of pests and weeds; a nutrient budgeting tool to assist farmers in balancing soil amendments; cover crop field trials to determine how they affect fertility and pests on organic farms as well as efficacy tests of organically accepted pest control products. On the economic side, the project is developing enterprise budgets and farm business management information from established farms to help farmers evaluate farm success based upon holistic organic farming goals and objectives.

Growers in the Driver's Seat

Growers have played a key role in identifying research needs and directing the scope of the project from the beginning. Differing from the conventional top-down research model that goes from researchers to extension agents to farmers, NEON is a unique, grassroots-up, systems approach project that utilizes farmer expertise in seeking to understand the impacts of organic management on soil fertility, pest control and economic decision-making. In an intensive evaluative process in early
February, a panel of experienced organic farmers met for a weekend with facilitators and researchers to delineate state-of-the-art organic practices, brainstorm research needs and focus on crop rotation goals for the Rotational Planner segment of the project.

The NEON Core Team

Working together since early 2001 to formulate and develop the program, the NEON design team consists of farmers, researchers at Cornell University, the University of Maine and the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, and several nonprofit organizations, including the Northeast Organic Farming Associations of New York and New Jersey, the New England Small Farm Institute, the Organic Materials Review Institute and New York Certified Organic. The project is funded by a $1.2 million, two year grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems (IFAFS) with its hub at Cornell University’s Department of Horticulture. NEON is currently seeking additional partners for all activities -- please contact Steve Gilman, Director at 518/583-4613 for more information.

Studies Started on Focal Farms

Eleven exemplary, well-established organic farms throughout the northeast have been chosen as NEON partners for the on-farm study component of the project. Organic farms are generally highly diverse operations and this selection is no exception. Here’s the lineup:

Watershed Organic Farm, Pennington, NJ. In the midst of encroaching suburbia, farmer Jim Kinsel grows 59 acres of vegetables and berries for a CSA serving 1700 families, as well as farmers markets and a pick-your-own operation on land protected by a local stewardship association.

Paradise Organics, Paradise, PA. With over 25 years greenhouse and growing experience, Chris Petersheim produces long-season successions of salad greens, brassicas, peppers and other crops for wholesale markets on 4.5 jewel-like acres in lush Lancaster county and manages a year-round produce business in conjunction with other farms and distributors.

Spiral Path Farm, Loysville, PA (Harrisburg area). Mike and Terra Brownback and family manage 60 hillside acres in contoured beds growing lettuce, squash, tomatoes, greenhouse tomatoes and other vegetables for wholesale markets and a CSA.

Fair Hills Farm, Chestertown, MD. Ed Fry organically manages 400 acres on his own farm on the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay and 800 acres at the nearby U.S. Naval Academy, producing corn and alfalfa for Horizon Dairy and his own conventional dairy operation.

Klaas and Mary-Howell Martens Farm, Penn Yan, NY. The Martens manage 1300 acres of spelt, soybeans and feed corn as well as processing snap beans, cabbage and sweet corn on the western shore of
Lake Seneca. They also run a value-added organic feed and seed business to process area organically grown crops and increase markets.

**Beech Grove Farm**, Beech Grove, PA (Williamsport area). Anne and Eric Nordell have been farming their hilltop farm for over 20 years utilizing horse-drawn implements and a well-developed rotation system to effectively manage weeds and pests.

**Blue Heron Farm**, Lodi, NY. Lou Johns and Robin Ostfeld have been farming their land since 1986. They grow a wide assortment of vegetables for the Ithaca Farmers Market, wholesale accounts and a "winter share" CSA on 12 acres using a permanent bed system with grass pathways.

**Myer Farm**, Ovid, NY. John Myer grows over 800 acres of soybeans, feed corn, spelt, winter wheat and hay in Seneca County to supply foreign and domestic organic wholesale grain and feed markets.

**Upper Forty Farm**, Cromwell, CT. Kathy Caruso, her husband Bennett and son Andy grow specialty heirloom vegetables, cut flowers and green beans on 22 acres in the lower Connecticut River valley for Farmers markets in West Hartford and Darien, CT as well as a wholesale market and a CSA.

**Kestrel Farm**, Westminster, VT. Tom Harlow grows 10,000 heads of lettuce per week along with parsnips, sweet corn and cut flowers for wholesale accounts and the family business on 50 acres of upper Connecticut River valley soil, north of Brattleboro while Merrilee helps manage the large retail organic vegetable and greenhouse business in conjunction with Tom's brothers and other family members.

**New Leaf Farm**, Durham, ME. Dave and Christine Colson grow intensive salad greens, greenhouse tomatoes, winter squash and mixed vegetables on 9.5 acres for restaurants, Natural foods stores and a CSA in the Portland area.

More detailed information on the Focal Farms (and pictures!) will be posted on the NEON website: www.neon.cornell.edu. The full, in-depth Case Studies will be published in 2004.

**UPCOMING NEON FIELD DAY ~ Organic Crops and Soils**

**Wednesday, August 14, 2002 in Penn Yan, NY at 9:30 AM**

Meet at the Yates County Fairgrounds, on Old Rt. 14A -- just South of the village of Penn Yan. Visit the farms of Klaas and Mary-Howell Martens and their neighbors for a first hand look at large scale organic grain production on some of the 8,000 organic acres in Yates County. Morning presentations followed by a bus tour of area fields with talks by organic farmers explaining how they grow their crops organically and by University researchers who will demonstrate the principles behind the results. Lunch is available on site.

Pre-registration: call Maxine Welcome at 607-255-5439
Fee is $15

For more information, please call Brian Caldwell at 607-564-1060.