

Sustainable Agriculture

Volume 7, Issue 11 – November 1999

Start with your customers when evaluating new farm-based enterprises

Small regional wineries, bed and breakfasts, direct marketing of meat and producing nursery plants are examples of a few farm-based enterprises. There are hundreds more, limited only by your imagination.

"You need to start with who your customers are and what they want," says Karl Foord, educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. Foord encourages farm families to think beyond the traditional producing of corn and soybeans for the export market.

At least to begin with, you may want to consider alternative enterprises to provide some supplemental income, as opposed to your sole income.

Farming alternatives can be grouped into these categories:

- Nontraditional crops, livestock and other farm products.
- Service, recreation, tourism, food processing, woodlots and other enterprises based on farm and natural resources.
- Unconventional production systems such as organic farming or aquaculture.
- Direct marketing and other entrepreneurial marketing strategies.

Foord has helped Gene and Judy Kimmes of Hampton, Minn., develop an "Amazing Minnesota Maze" attraction. It's a life-size maze in a cornfield, with other attractions including fresh vegetables, a merchandise tent, small petting zoo, helicopter rides, pumpkin patch, hayrides and a kiddies wagon ride.

The maze has captured headlines in the Twin Cities area and attracted well over 10,000 customers. But the challenge, Foord says, is to think of what you can do, as opposed to copying another business.

Help is available with a publication "*Farming Alternatives, A Guide to Evaluating the Feasibility of New Farm-Based Enterprises.*" You can order a copy from Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108, telephone (612) 625-9733. The cost is \$8 plus 6.5 percent sales tax for Minnesota residents.

The 88-page publication has worksheets, an appendix with additional sources of information, references and recommended reading. It takes you through the steps of personal and family considerations, identifying alternatives, marketing, production, profitability, financial feasibility and making a decision.

Rural sociologists to share Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems

Cornelia and Jan Flora, rural sociologists from Iowa State University, will share the School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems at the University of Minnesota.

During the coming year, this wife-husband team will work to strengthen University-citizen collaboration for more sustainable development throughout the state.

The Floras are known for their research and outreach work on community social capital. Cornelia is the director of the North Central Regional Center on Rural Development, which includes Minnesota and 11 other Midwestern States. Jan is a community sociologist with Iowa State University Extension. Both are professors of sociology at ISU, and will be at the University of Minnesota through April 2000.

Cornelia Flora says, "The land grant concept is a powerful tool for citizen involvement. We hope to focus our research and analysis on new ways for the University of Minnesota, the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships and local communities to relate to one another. Farm-community entrepreneurial partnerships in a regional context are particularly appropriate in this period of rapid concentration and vertical coordination in agriculture."

Jan Flora adds, "Social capital is high in Minnesota communities, so it is an ideal place to deepen and broaden the land grant model. We hope to apply what we learn here in our subsequent work in Iowa and the rest of the Midwest."

They are currently conducting research on natural resource decision-making with Ecuadorian colleagues in the highlands of Ecuador, using a participatory approach similar to that planned for Minnesota.

Their two main goals are to first, work with the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships and the Landscape and Human Health Initiative to design new approaches for linking communities, regions and the university in new relationships; and second, to assess decision making around locally defined sustainability questions. The latter will involve following issues from local, regional and state levels to determine what groups are involved, who is left out and how that might be changed to encourage more sustainable policies.

The Floras will work in collaboration with other University initiatives including the University of Minnesota Swine Center, the Alternative Swine Production Systems Program and with James Van Der Pol, Karen Lehman and Julie Ristau, who also share the Endowed Chair.

The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) manages the Chair, with support from board members of the School of Agriculture Alumni Association. For more information, call MISA at 800-909-6472, Jan Flora at (612) 625-4243, or Cornelia Flora at (612) 624-3702.

Applications due Dec. 31 for new organic cost-share program

Minnesota broke new ground in organic agriculture with the unveiling of a new \$35,000 cost-sharing program designed to partially reimburse farmers for the cost of organic inspection and certification. Funded by the Organic Agriculture Promotion and Education Act passed during the 1999 Minnesota legislative session, the cost-share program is the first of its kind in the country.

Available through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), the Organic Cost Share Program will reimburse Minnesota producers for up to two-thirds of the cost for organic inspection and certification. Applications will be taken through Dec. 31, 1999, for certifications granted for the 1999 crop year. Producers will be eligible for up to five years of payments, with a maximum annual payment of \$200 per producer.

MDA Commissioner Gene Hugoson said the cost-share program fits well with the Department's goal of giving farmers flexibility to adapt to marketplace developments.

"Organic agriculture is a rapidly growing part of Minnesota's farm sector, and this innovative cost-share program will certainly help with that development," Commissioner Hugoson said. A total of \$35,000 is available for the Organic Cost Share Program this year. Eligible applicants will receive pro-rated payments if demand for the program exceeds this total. Rules for administering this program were developed with input from organic industry representatives through the Organic Advisory Task Force.

For more information, contact the Organic Program of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Applicants must provide proof of certification and proof of payment, and they must fill out the Organic Cost Share Application form. This form can be obtained on the MDA website at www.mda.state.mn.us or by contacting Prescott Bergh, MDA Organic Program Director, at 90 West Plato Blvd., St. Paul MN, 55107. Bergh can be reached by phone at (651) 215-0367, or by e-mail at prescott.bergh@state.mn.us.

Wallace Institute report says organic agriculture more profitable

Organic agriculture is more profitable than conventional agriculture, according to a recent report by the Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture. The report draws on a variety of sources, including literature reviews, case studies and university-sponsored studies. It was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to investigate the profitability of producing organic grains and soybeans in the Midwest.

The Economics of Organic Grain and Soybean Production in the Midwestern United States is available on the Wallace Institute's Web site at www.hawiaa.org, or by calling (301) 441-8777. Hard copies are \$15.

Sustainable agriculture professional development proposals due Dec. 17

The North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NCRSARE) program is seeking proposals for professional development initiatives in sustainable agriculture. Projects should focus on professional development education concepts, systems, and practice of sustainable agriculture for Extension, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and/or other appropriate agencies and agricultural educators.

Projects can include educational activities that take place on farms or in workshops or conferences; development of educational and/or curriculum materials; or innovative combinations of activities and materials. The outcome of professional development projects must be the development of educators knowledgeable in sustainable agriculture and capable of conducting adult education programs. About \$400,000 will be available to fund projects in the 12-state North Central Region.

You can obtain the call for proposals from the NCRSARE website at www.sare.org/ncrsare, or by calling (402) 472-7081. Feel free to contact Bill Wilcke, University of Minnesota Extension Sustainable Ag Program Coordinator (wwilcke@extension.umn.edu or 612-625-8205) to discuss ideas.

Changes in MISA staffing

Debra Elias Morse has resigned her position with MISA to pursue independent consulting. Debra was on staff for five years and contributed in innumerable ways to our programming. She was instrumental in the development of the Information Exchange and Misa's web site: www.misa.umn.edu. Debra's ability to synthesize complex ideas and put them into working documents has been invaluable to the work of

MISA. Her work in the development of the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships will have a long-lasting impact on the state. We wish Debra all the best.

MISA also welcomes Roxanne Lewis as the principal secretary. In addition to her strong organizational skills, she is also a Master Gardener. Roxanne can be reached at the MISA office at (612) 625-8235 or toll free 1-800-909-6472; email: misamail@tc.umn.edu.

Minnesota Forage Conference at Hinckley Jan. 11-12

The 25th Annual Minnesota Forage Conference and Trade Show will be held for the first time in East Central Minnesota on Tuesday and Wednesday, Jan. 11-12, at the Grand Casino, east of Hinckley.

The conference will include an evening program on "Pasture Management Tips For Small and Large Acreages" on Tuesday evening, Jan. 11. This evening program will be targeted at the beginning producer, the small as well as large acreage owner and will run from 7 to 9:30 p.m. A trade show with commercial forage product exhibits will run from 6 to 10 p.m. that evening and all day on the 12th.

"Forages For Large and Small Producers" will be the theme of the program on Jan. 12, which will run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The morning general session will cover forages for Northeastern Minnesota; interseeding biotechnology and controlling N and P flow through animals, soil and plants. Afternoon concurrent sessions will be on hay, beef and dairy topics.

During the day on Jan. 11 there will also be a Forage Crop Production Workshop for forage crop advisors. This workshop is designed to help crop advisors and others to become updated on the latest information on forage production and to help them to maintain their crop advisor certification by obtaining continuing education credits.

Contact the Minnesota Forage and Grassland Council Office at (651) 436-3930 or the Kanabec County Extension Office at (320) 679-6342 for more details.

Calendar of 1999 events...

These events are sponsored by numerous organizations. More information is available on MISA's website: www.misa.umn.edu

Friday-Saturday, November 12-13, Baraboo, Wis. **Income Options for Small Farms.** Contact Paul Dietmann, (608) 355-3250.

Saturday, Nov. 20, Alexandria. **Sustainable Agriculture and Hemp Workshop.** Contact Marlene Weber (320) 762-2816.

Friday, November 26, swine field day, two on-farm research projects: **Converting Buildings to Deep Straw-Based Units/Raising Antibiotic-Free Hogs.** 10 a.m., Dave Serfling farm, Preston (call (507) 765-2797 for directions), and 1:30 p.m., Dwight Ault farm, Austin (call (507) 437-3085 for directions).

Monday-Tuesday, Dec. 6-7, Madison, Wis. **Adding Value Through Environmental Marketing: Opportunities for Food Producers, Processors and Retailers.** Contact DeEtta Bilek (218) 445-5475, deebilek@wcta.net.

About this newsletter...

For the past year we've been funded by the Minnesota Extension Service and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) with support from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

We're always looking for story ideas. Send them to the editor: Jack Sperbeck, 405 Coffey Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108, (612) 625-1794. E-mail: jsperbeck@extension.umn.edu. Other editorial board members: Helene Murray (612) 625-0220, murra@021.tc.umn.edu; Tom Wegner (612) 374-8400, twegner@extension.umn.edu; and Bill Wilcke (612) 625-8205, wwilcke@extension.umn.edu

Our mission statement: To help bring people together to influence the future of agriculture and rural communities to achieve socially, environmentally and economically sustainable farms and communities.