

Sustainable Agriculture

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Rural communities should emphasize building relationships

Community development in rural areas has historically meant building “things” such as new schools or recreational centers. But in the future, rural areas should emphasize strengthening relationships and working together, says a sociologist at Iowa State University.

“The most effective community development in the future will result from cooperation, sharing and building alliances,” says Paul Lasley, who spoke Nov. 22 at a Crop Pest Management Short Course sponsored by the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

We’re witnessing a “tearing of the social fabric in rural America that’s been going on since the 1980s,” Lasley says. “Social change in the rural Midwest is creating distrust—many people no longer trust each other.”

“Doing the right thing is being replaced by emphasis on the profit motive,” Lasley says, “and many people have a fear of being taken advantage of. We need to ask if we’re creating a rural culture where no one wants to live.”

Unfortunately, Lasley says, he doesn’t expect the farm crisis to disappear anytime soon. “We need to distinguish between a ‘farm crisis’ and a ‘long-term chronic problem,’ which is what we really have.” “We’re going through a long-term restructuring of rural America that’s broader than just farming. It is painful and difficult for many people, and there are no quick solutions,” he says.

“Rural areas need to focus on strengthening relationships, sharing, cooperating and networking,” Lasley says. “In order to strengthen rural communities and rural culture, people must devote their energies to working together, getting to know and helping each other, and learning the ‘art of neighboring.’”

Lasley may be reached at the Department of Sociology, 304 East Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-1070, (515) 294-0937, e-mail: plasley@iastate.edu.

Corn-soybean producers looking for more crop diversity,

More corn and soybeans equals fewer people. That’s the trend in Minnesota and the 12-state Midwest Corn Belt region, says Paul Porter, a cropping systems agronomist with the University of Minnesota’s Southwest Research and Outreach Center at Lamberton.

“There is an inverse relationship between the acres planted to corn and soybeans in a given county and recent population changes in that county,” Porter says. In the 12-state Corn Belt region, only four counties with over 80 percent of their total land in either corn or soybeans increased in population between 1980 and 1990, whereas 51 counties lost population during the same time frame.

The same trend prevails in Minnesota. In 1972, no Minnesota counties had over 75 percent of their total land area planted to either corn or soybeans, but there were 17 counties by 1998, Porter says. All but one of those counties lost population between 1980 and 1990, while at the same time Minnesota's population increased by 7.3 percent.

Minnesota had a far more diverse agriculture before shifts in agricultural markets after World War II, according to Philip Raup, applied economist at the U of M. In 1950, 71 percent of the state's gross agricultural receipts came from livestock; 29 percent from field crops. By 1998, livestock receipts dropped to 49 percent, while crops accounted for 51 percent.

Production costs for both corn and soybeans have been outpacing yield increases, Porter says. As a percentage of total direct expenses, the seed and crop chemical input costs have increased from about 20 percent to about 25 percent since 1989. "One reason," Porter says, "is increased pressure from insects, weeds and diseases associated with a greater reliance on the corn-soybean rotation."

The corn-soybean rotation is a great rotation in many regards, Porter says. "However, at some point the heavy dependence on this rotation may become a liability, not an asset," Porter says. "While this rotation has been adopted and intensified by more farmers in the last quarter century, what we may find is that what works effectively for the individual farmer may cease to work effectively when most farmers in an area come to rely on it."

"The need for more diversity in their farming operations is not news to many corn-soybean producers," Porter says. "But our challenge is to acknowledge the need for change and help them in the process." He may be reached at (507) 752-7372.

Agricultural, social sciences working together on rural issues

How researchers from a number of disciplines can work together and with community organizers and citizens to address rural issues was the topic of a symposium at Morris, Minn., in late October. Over 80 people attended a session on interdisciplinary collaboration, "Building Bridges: Partnerships Between the Agricultural and Social Sciences in Research and Outreach Programs Designed to Address Rural Issues."

A majority of those attending were interested in continuing the interdisciplinary dialogue. For more information about the symposium or future initiatives, contact Wynne Wright at the University of Minnesota West Central Research and Outreach Center at Morris: (320) 589-1711, or wrightw@mrs.umn.edu

Funding available for projects that help reduce petroleum-based pesticides

The Agricultural Utilization Research Institute (AURI) is looking for projects that reduce the use and impact of petroleum-based pesticides on Minnesota farms. AURI's Pesticide Reduction Options program has grants of up to \$40,000 for research, demonstration or technology transfer projects.

Eligible applications include public and private institutions of research and higher education, non-profit organizations and private, for-profit companies. All proposals must be sponsored by a non-profit organization that has farmer or grower members. Examples are commodity groups, cooperatives, farm organizations, grower associations and sustainable agriculture organizations.

Applications must be received by Jan. 21, 2000. For more information, contact Edward Wene at (218) 281-7600.

Alternatives for lessening land use conflicts

Urban sprawl — uneven, low-density residential development — is not a new phenomenon. Urban areas have been encroaching into rural areas for most of this century. Nor is it an isolated problem. In the 1990s, approximately one quarter of the nation's counties classified as metropolitan were experiencing population growth averaging 10 percent; half were rural counties which experienced population growth at the same rate as metro counties; and one quarter were rural counties which lost population. When sprawl occurs, it contributes to the loss of farmland and open space and brings increased infrastructure costs, traffic congestion and environmental impacts.

The National Public Policy Education Committee, in cooperation with Farm Foundation and the Kettering Foundation, has produced a resource booklet, "Land Use Conflict: When City and Country Clash." The booklet presents an overview of sprawl and discusses four alternatives for addressing land use problems and the consequences and trade-offs of each. The booklet is designed to help citizens and decision-makers identify their goals and beliefs and reach common ground for community development strategies. It is an excellent resource for public policy education programs. For copies, contact Andrea Jahn at (612) 625-9733, jahnx003@tc.umn.edu.

New publication outlines how to do on-farm research

A new, 12-page bulletin for farmers, ranchers and the extension educators who work with them outlines how to conduct research at the farm level. Published by the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program's Sustainable Agriculture Network, the bulletin offers practical tips for crop and livestock producers, as well as a comprehensive list of more in-depth resources.

Real-life examples — from a Pennsylvania vegetable farmer testing new rotations to a Montana producer experimenting with a legume called black medic to build soil and prolong pasture — may stimulate research ideas. Co-written by a team of research scientists, the bulletin features many SARE grant recipients.

The free publication is available at www.sare.org/san/htdocs/pubs/. Or, call (301) 504-6422 and request a copy of "Put Your Ideas to the Test: How to Conduct Research on Your Farm or Ranch."

Calendar of events, 1999-2000

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

Thursday-Saturday, Dec. 9-11, **Acre USA Conference**, Radisson Hotel South, Minneapolis. Call 1-800-355-5313.

Tuesday, Dec. 14, **Marketing Opportunities for a New Dawn of Dairy Farming**, St. Charles Community Center. DeEtta Bilek (218) 445-5475, deebilek@wcta.net.

Wednesday, Dec. 15, **Wintering & Winter Housing in Dairy Grazing Systems**, Hutchinson Vo-Tech. DeEtta Bilek (218) 445-5475, deebilek@wcta.net.

Tuesday-Wednesday, Jan. 11-12, **25th Annual Minnesota Forage Conference**, Grand Casino, Hinckley. Call (651) 436-3930

Saturday, Jan. 15, **Alternative Crops and Livestock**, Western SFA Annual Meeting, Clara City. LeeAnn VanDerPol (320) 847-3432, vanderpol@prairiefare.com.

Wednesday, Jan. 19, **Organic Marketing** (in conjunction with NFO National Convention), Hilton Tower, Minneapolis. Carmen Fernholz (320) 598-3010, fernholz@tc.umn.edu.

Friday-Sunday, Jan. 28-30, **Winter Conference**, Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society, Ramkota Inn, Aberdeen, S.D. Call (701) 883-4304, trhaigh@dakota.net.

Saturday, Jan 29, **Biological Farming—Soil to Consumer**, SFA of Central Minnesota. Lynda Converse (320) 594-2456.

Thursday-Saturday, Feb. 3-5, **Upper Midwest Regional Fruit and Vegetable Conference & Trade Show**, St. Cloud. Call (612) 434-0400.

Friday-Saturday, Feb. 4-5, **Minnesota Grazing Conference**, Victoria Inn, Hutchinson. Doug & Janet Gunnink (507) 237-5162, dgunnink@prairie.lakes.com.

Friday-Saturday, Feb. 11-12, **Marketing, Marketing, Marketing, 2nd Annual Value Added Conference**, Ramada Inn, Eau Claire, Wis. Call (608) 263-3981.

Tuesday-Wednesday, Feb. 15-16, **Minnesota Organic Conference**, Kelly Inn, St. Cloud. Doug & Janet Gunnink (507) 237-5162, dgunnink@prairie.lakes.com.

Friday-Saturday, Feb. 25-26, **SFA of Minnesota Annual Meeting**, Morris. DeEtta Bilek (218) 445-5475, deebilek@wcta.net.

Thursday-Saturday, March 16-18, **Upper Midwest Organic Conference**, LaCrosse, Wis.

Tuesday-Thursday, March 28-30, **Upper Mississippi River Conference**, Mary Hanks (651) 296-1277, mary.hanks@state.mn.us.

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.