

Sustainable Agriculture

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Smaller Livestock Farms Better at Supporting Small Towns

Not all farms are equal when it comes to supporting the economy and social life of small towns. For example, as dairy farms increase in size they depend less on the local economy, according to a new University of Minnesota study.

"Farmers who have expanded are often able to shop around for their feed and other supplies," says Patricia Weir Love. She studied how changes in dairy farming affected the economy of Green Isle, Minn., located in Sibley County, 50 miles from downtown Minneapolis. She interviewed present and former business owners, farmers and government officials.

Love found the larger dairy farms were able to negotiate more favorable prices with firms outside of Green Isle. "These larger farms are prompted to shop around for low prices since expansion often means they've assumed considerable debt burdens," she wrote in her report.

"Keeping costs as low as possible is essential to the survival of these large farms. But given the amount of money dairy farmers spend on feed, a shift to larger farms can mean a significant blow to a local economy whose feed stores do not have the most competitive prices in the region.

"This situation may become worse as distance to a metropolitan area increases. More distant locations are not as likely to see a conversion of dairy farms into smaller hobby farms that might support a local feed store and offset the losses associated with a move to larger dairy farms."

Larger beef and hog farms are also less likely to interact with the local economy, according to a related study in southwestern Minnesota by John Chism. As livestock farms increased in size, the additional economic activity they generated was very difficult for local economies to capture, says Dick Levins, economist with the University of Minnesota's Extension Service and faculty advisor for both Love and Chism.

Levins says larger farms may save money by buying supplies from distant sources. "But what does this mean for local businesses and schools? Is it enough to make a living, or is it important to have someplace worth living in?"

Green Isle is now surrounded by large grain farms. When dairy farming declined, the crop farming that came in to replace it had far less economic value to the community. Crop farmers spend less than dairy farms and the things they do buy, such as fertilizer and chemicals, have relatively little economic value to the community.

"With a dairy operation, you relied on the veterinarian, the creamery, DHIA, artificial insemination, livestock equipment and feed," the Green Isle banker said. "The move from livestock to crops eliminated a lot of those needs. This causes people who owned the businesses to go elsewhere."

Who owns the land is another factor in rural economies. Many current land owners who live around Green Isle are collecting rent checks from crop farmers, Love says. "But in 10 to 15 years the children of these current land owners may be collecting the checks in the Twin Cities or elsewhere. This could pose a challenge to Green Isle's development as this revenue is drained from the community."

A copy of Love's report, *The Impact of Changes in Dairy Farming on a Local Economy: A Case Study*, is available from Dick Levins, Department of Applied Economics, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108. Telephone (612) 625-5238.

Have an "Emuburger," See \$6,000 Leather Jackets Oct. 7

For farmers with few acres who want to diversify, emu production could be another source of income, says Angela Paulson, an Elbow Lake, Minn., producer. The emu is a large, non-flying bird of the ostrich family.

An emu seminar--for the curious, the serious and the experienced--is scheduled Saturday, Oct. 7 at the Fergus Falls Middle School from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. National and state experts will discuss getting started, marketing, incubation and hatching, and raising chicks to adults. There will be an emuburger bar at noon. Registration is \$15 per person, or \$20 after Sept. 23. Registration includes the noon burger bar and supper buffet.

"From 7 to 9 p.m. the general public is invited at no charge to see the fashion show and exhibit hall," Paulson says. Emu boots sell for \$800 and jackets range from \$1,600 to \$6,000. The exhibit hall will feature input products for the emu industry.

For more information, contact Angela Paulson, Rt. 2, Box 64, Elbow Lake, MN., 56531, (612) 528-2294; or Vicki Haugen, Rt. 3, Box 229, Hawley, MN., 56549, (612) 937-5588.

Proceedings Available From Alternative Livestock Conference

The emu (see above story) is one of 15 animals covered in a proceedings book from the recent Alternative Livestock Conference on the University of Minnesota's St. Paul Campus. Major animals covered are bison, elk, emu, ostrich and red deer. Others are bees, free range chickens, llamas, geese, fallow deer, rabbits, rhea, reindeer and miniature donkeys. Cost for the 300-page, three-ring binder publication is \$40, which includes shipping and handling. Shipments are via UPS for U.S. orders Write: Registrar-Alternative Livestock, 405 Coffey Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108, or call 1-800-367-5363.

Individual Farmers Get Highest Marks as Environmental Caretakers

A national survey of how citizens view natural resource concerns in their communities sheds some light on how the public views agriculture and natural resource issues like water quality.

Water pollution (25%) was at the top of the list, followed closely by air pollution (24%) and "no problems," (22%). The survey was conducted last December and January for the Natural Resources

Conservation Services (NRCS--formerly the Soil Conservation Service). It found the percentage of participants who reported there were "no problems" increased with age, from 18% among those less than 45 years to 22% among 45 to 54 year-olds and 27% for those 55 and older.

All findings are based on a sample of 1,250 people with a margin of error of less than 3% at the 95% confidence level. While more than 90% of the survey participants were not farmers or ranchers, they gave individual farmers the highest ranking as environmental caretakers among 10 industries mentioned.

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 a "serious pollutor" and 10 an "excellent caretaker of the environment," farmers rated 6.71. Agriculture in general (6.34) closely followed farmers in the caretaking category; oil (4.43) and manufacturing (4.77) were the lowest. Other survey findings:

- Fifty-seven percent believe farming's impact on agriculture should be regulated the same as manufacturing and industry. Voluntary compliance with incentives was mentioned as the most appropriate way to deal with the issue.
- Participants believe farmers and society (35.8% and 38.3%, respectively) should share the responsibility of paying the costs of protecting agricultural natural resources. More than half (51%) said spending for natural resource conservation should increase.
- Water related issues, including quality, availability, irrigation and flooding, were mentioned as the most important natural resource issues in the next decade. Forty-five percent of survey participants cited water quality and water availability as key issues.
- People viewed their own communities as being in better shape environmentally than the United States or the earth as a whole.

For a copy of the NRCS National Survey of Attitudes Towards Natural Resource Conservation, send \$10 for postage and handling to CTIC, Attitude Survey, 1220 Potter Drive, Rm. 170, W. Lafayette, IN 46906-1383, (317) 494-5969.

Natural-Air Corn Drying is "Natural" For Livestock Producers

Natural-air corn drying works well for crop farmers and is especially adaptable for livestock producers. It involves using natural air, a bin with a full-perforated floor and a fan. Natural-air drying is energy efficient and produces better quality grain, says Bill Wilcke, an engineer with the University of Minnesota's Extension Service. Wilcke is also a board member of the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA).

He and co-worker Vance Morey have written a new publication, Natural Air Corn Drying in the Upper Midwest. Compared with higher temperature, gas-fired drying, natural-air drying has these advantages:

- Requires less equipment. All that's necessary is a bin with a full perforated floor, a properly sized fan, and a grain conveyor to fill the bin.
- Requires less labor at harvest. During harvest, the only labor requirement is to fill the bin and turn on the fan. Most of the drying takes place after harvest.
- Doesn't slow harvest since drying takes place in storage. There's no need to wait for completion of drying before transferring grain to storage. Once corn moisture is down to the recommended level, bins can be filled as fast as the corn is harvested.
- Produces better quality grain. Test weight and germination are higher, and stress cracks and breakage susceptibility are lower than for corn dried at higher temperatures.

- Uses fewer units of purchased energy per unit of water removed. However, the energy for natural-air dryers is electricity-- more expensive per unit of energy than gas.

The new publication is for corn producers, educators, consultants and equipment dealers who are interested in natural-air drying in Minnesota and neighboring states. For more information, contact Wilcke at (612) 625-9733

The publication, number BU-6577-NR, is available at county extension offices in Minnesota. It's also available at a retail cost of \$2.75 from the Distribution Center, Minnesota Extension Service, 1420 Eckles Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108-6069. Total cost for Minnesota citizens is \$4.94, which includes a 7% sales tax and \$2 for shipping and handling. You can order and charge it to your credit card by calling 1-800-876- 8636.

There Are Many Ways to Capture Value-Added Revenue

Think big, think small, be creative. Approaches to farmer involvement in meat processing run the gamut from a cooperative of thousands of ranchers to farm families marketing meat from a few animals a year.

For example, the Northern Plains Premium Beef is a proposal for a producer-owned beef packing plant that could process 300,000 head of northern cattle annually. The plant would have a guaranteed procurement of cattle from its member owners in the states of North and South Dakota, Montana, Minnesota and the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

"Cattle producers could diversify their income without expanding or adding a new enterprise, and without taking a job off the ranch," according to a Northern Plains promotional brochure. "Dividends paid on processing profits and value based marketing could send more dollars back to producers, allowing them to capture the farm-to-retail price spread for themselves."

For more information, contact Ryan Taylor, NPPB Communications Director, HC1 Box 71, Towner, ND 58788; (701) 759-3466.

On a smaller business scale, there were many examples of value-added activities at a recent bus tour for ag professionals organized by Minnesota's central chapter of the Sustainable Farming Association. The noon lunch— contributed by small farm-related businesses—included wild rice bread, Gouda cheese, bratwurst, summer sausage, Glad corn, Gemini Guernsey milk, ice tea and Grandpa's Snack 'N Oats.

One tour stop was at Little Wing Farm, Verndale, operated by Carol Ekarius and Ken Woodard. They have a small, diversified livestock operation and one of their long-range goals is developing value-added marketing to improve net returns. "We're marketing more and more of our animals directly, keeping a bigger portion of the consumer's dollar in our pockets," Ken said.

Apply for a Sustainable Agriculture Grant

Farmers, researchers and educators can apply for grants of up to \$25,000 each from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Program. Projects eligible for funding are those that benefit the environment, increase net farm profits or improve the quality of life for a farm family.

Applications will be accepted through Dec. 8. For more information and applications, contact Wayne Monsen, Grant and Loan Program Coordinator, MDA Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Program, 90 W. Plato Blvd., St. Paul, MN 55107; (612) 296-7673.

Transitions...

We're sorry to report that Phil Larsen has resigned from this newsletter's editorial board. Phil is now spending more time teaching and doing research in the Department of Plant Pathology. He continues to coordinate the Kellogg Foundation "Visions for Change" project through the college office.

He chaired extension's Sustainable Agriculture Initiative and was a key player in establishing this newsletter. Phil worked hard to make sustainable agriculture credible in the academic community. We'll miss his leadership, enthusiasm, fund raising expertise and good ideas.

Stop in 413 Hayes Hall and say hello to Charlotte Conn, the new MISA secretary. Charlotte is from North Carolina.

We Can Use Your Story Ideas

Keep the story ideas coming. 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 are Don Olson 612/ 625-9292 and Helene Murray 612/ 625-0220.

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.