

Sustainable Agriculture

Volume 5, Issue 8 –August 1997

“Feeding the Saints” project aimed at developing local markets

When three colleges all with a “saint” in their name wanted to buy lots of locally grown food, it may have looked like divine intervention for some central Minnesota farmers looking for a market. Eventually it led to a one-year grant for a pilot project called “Feeding the Saints.”

It all started about a year ago when farmers from the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) were having lunch with professors from St. Johns and St. Cloud State universities. “Someone asked why local farmers couldn’t help feed the students and faculty,” says Tim King, SFA program manager. So he and other farmers met with food service managers from St. Johns, St. Benedict’s and St. Cloud State.

“We saw a huge market. They basically said we’ll take your products,” says King, “but we weren’t ready to feed that many people.” The SFA members went back to the drawing board started a marketing committee and things began to roll.

Enter Kim Zeuli, a graduate student in the University of Minnesota’s Department of Applied Economics and an intern with the Minnesota Food Association. She interviewed all food service managers, documented the food products they needed, and then met with SFA’s marketing committee.

Then last winter, King and other farmers visited Hendricks College in Arkansas. “They’d tried a similar project seven or eight years ago, which basically failed. But it was successful in some ways and we learned some marketing lessons,” King says.

“What we face is a situation where three colleges want to buy food from us. They’re unique customers and we need to figure out how to meet those needs in a variety of ‘small’ ways.”

Test products are being developed to see how they work in the college food systems. Present plans call for St. Cloud State to receive some locally produced meat and vegetables this September. A project coordinator will soon be hired whose job will be taking over customer relations and coordinating delivery of test food products.

“The grant is from the Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE) program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture,” King says. Institutional markets such as the three colleges are a huge advantage (compared to selling to individuals) for farmers developing their own markets.”

“We need to develop practical, hard-nosed business-oriented systems,” King says. “Most farmers are used to just taking their grain to the elevator. With our own marketing system, we need to figure out what to do. The grant gives us room to experiment and make mistakes.”

King is available at (320) 732-6203, e-mail timking@tc.umn.edu.

Ecology and agriculture was topic of Morris training conference

Linking ecology and agriculture—how grazing relates to ecology principles—whole farm planning—ecological views of farmland loss. These were some of the topics at the “Linking People, Purpose and Place: An Ecological Approach to Agriculture” conference at the University of Minnesota’s West Central Experiment Station, Morris in late July.

Over 50 participants from seven North Central states also toured the station’s grazing sites and the Stan Hennen and Craig Murphy farms. Attending were farmers, students, Extension Service educators, Experiment Station researchers, crop consultants and professionals from state and federal agencies. The event was one of three regional sessions planned this summer by the North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The training sessions were based on the premise that distance between people, purpose and place has led to many of our current problems in agriculture. To wit: the purpose of agriculture is to feed and clothe people while protecting the environment and agriculture is pursued in a particular place. The place is a landscape or region with a unique combination of soils, climate, farming systems, people, infrastructure and social organization. Together they form an agroecosystem. By recognizing and working with the sustainable structures and processes in our ecosystems that underlie our farming systems, we can effectively match our purpose to each place to achieve a lasting agriculture.

The next three stories were gleaned from the conference.

Midwest project searches for systems to sustain agriculture, natural resources

Steve Oberle, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service, is coordinating a Midwest program aimed at estimating water quality impacts of both existing and alternative agricultural systems. The program has produced maps showing natural vegetation, farm land use, crop diversity, artificial drainage, and irrigation, net soil loss due to water erosion and conservation practices. Maps show the extent to which natural resources have been modified to support agriculture in the region.

Frequency of land used for crops and pasture exceeds 70 percent in much of the region; natural vegetation occupies less than 10 percent of the land in many areas. Subsurface and surface drainage, more than 35 percent in some areas, has contributed to loss of wetlands, with a direct effect on water quality. Irrigation has diverted water from natural ecosystems and increased the potential for leaching of agrichemicals, Oberle says. Excess erosion may threaten long-term productivity even though conservation practices have been implemented.

Transition to sustainable systems requires a gradual shift away from research and technologies that promote large-scale, highly specialized operations, he says, and toward on-farm resources for more diverse, management-intensive systems. Oberle can be reached at (715) 345-5978, e-mail sloberle@facstaff.wisc.edu.

Oil is back on the global agenda

Oberle (preceding article) says agriculture’s productivity gains since the 1950s have resulted from development of farming systems relying heavily on external inputs of energy and chemicals to replace management and on-farm resources. And a permanent decline in the global oil production rate is virtually certain to begin within 20 years, according to a commentary in *Nature*, May 8, 1997. The article, by geologist Craig Bond Hatfield, says the world probably will reach its maximum oil production rate in the

next 15 years and begin its decline in the first or second decade of the 21st century.

Hatfield says energy consumption in developing countries could surpass that in economically developed countries within 20 years. “There will be growing competition for a dwindling oil supply, which raises the question of how long standards of living can rise in the developing world and how long they can be maintained in the developed world . . . this phenomenon demands serious planning by the world’s governments.” Hatfield is in the Department of Geology, University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio 43606.

Whole farm planning is more than best management practices

There’s lots of interest in whole farm planning, according to Whole Farm Planning—What It Takes, a new report available from the Land Stewardship Project. The report is based on a 26-member working group that includes several farmers. The working group was convened by three organizations: the Land Stewardship Project, Minnesota Extension Service Water Quality Program and the Whole Farm Planning Program of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

Whole farm planning is distinct from other farm planning approaches since it’s founded on the long-term vision the farm family has for its future. A thorough understanding of the farm’s resources is necessary to set long-term goals. And, there’s opportunity for more varied farming systems and solutions that fall outside of best management practices. Another key concept: a farm is located in a watershed and a community.

The report says the whole farm planning process is voluntary, flexible, identifies the farm family’s goals and integrates ideas from cooperation with other farmers and service providers. Whole farm plans are confidential and the property of the farmer.

In terms of outcomes, whole farm planning will improve or maintain profitability, quality of life, natural resources, sustainability, and relationships with the community and the ability to observe and evaluate changes in practices and management. The report is available for postage and handling fee of \$2.50 from the Land Stewardship Project, 2200 4th St., White Bear Lake, MN 55110, (612) 653-0618.

Farm tour, “end of summer” celebration

A farm tour and potluck picnic is planned at the Jim and LeeAnn VanDerPol farm, Clara City, Sept. 6 at 3 p.m. The VanDerPols formerly kept their hogs in a conventional confinement system; they’re now in their fifth year outdoors. A hoop structure was built in the fall of ’95 and another is planned for this fall. For more information, contact LeeAnn VanDerPol at (320) 847-3432.

(A “Hoop Structures for Grow-Finish Swine” publication is available for \$4 from the University of Minnesota’s Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering Dept., 1390 Eckles Ave., St. Paul, MN 55108-6005, attention Terry. Or, call (612) 625-8288).

Two sustainable agriculture sessions at Extension conference

Controversial livestock issues and the role of the University of Minnesota Extension Service in making agriculture more sustainable will be discussed by two panels at the Extension Annual Conference Oct. 6-8 in Brainerd. For more information, contact Bill Wilcke at (612) 625-8205. Staff-faculty registration deadline is Sept. 12.

Regional small farm listening sessions

A national small farms commission coordinated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture has scheduled a listening session Aug. 22 in Sioux Falls, S.D. If you're interested in giving testimonials, either in person or via written statement, contact Jennifer Yezak Molen at (202) 690-0648, fax (202) 720-0596, e-mail jyezak@usda.gov.

Coming events...

Field day sponsors include the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Sustainable Agriculture Program, Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) and the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) of Minnesota.

Aug. 23, 10 a.m.- 5 p.m., Hazel and Chestnut Field Day, Badgersett Research Farm, Canton, Jan Joannides, (612) 624-4299.

Aug. 27, "Horticulture Day," Grand Rapids Branch Station, Grand Rapids,(218) 327-4490

Sept. 4, "Beef and Forage Day," Grand Rapids Branch Station, Grand Rapids,(218) 327-4490

Sept. 4, 1-3 p.m., "Learning Advanced Management Intensive Grazing Through Mentoring," Paul Weyrens or Bob Stommes, Fergus Falls, (218) 739-5246.

Sept. 6, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., " Small Farm Market Development: Harvest Festival," Jenifer Buckley, Carlton, (218) 727-1414.

Sept. 6, 10 a.m., " Perch Enterprise Budget," John Reynolds, Merrifield, (218) 765-3030.

Sept. 6, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., Buckwheat Workshop & Field Day, Tom Bilek farm, Aldrich,(218) 445-5475.

Sept. 6, 11 a.m.-3 p.m., "Buffalo: Animal from the Past: Key to the Future," Richard & Carolyn Brobjorg, Pipestone, (507) 825-5049.

Sept. 6, 12-4 p.m., "Wine Quality Grapes in Otter Tail County," Michael & Vicki Burke, Erhard, (218) 739-4549.

Sept. 6, 3-5 p.m., Hog production, including a pasture walk and hoop structure discussion, Jim VanDerPol, Clara City, (320) 847-3432.

Sept. 10, "Fall Field Day," Lamberton Branch Station, Lamberton (507) 752-7372

Sept. 11, "Corn and Soybean Field Day," Waseca Branch Station, Waseca (507) 835-3620

Sept. 12, "Clergy Day," Waseca Branch Station, Waseca, (507) 835-3620

Sept. 13, 1-3 p.m., "Sustainable Farming Association—Fall Farm Tour," Jenifer Buckley, Sturgeon Lake, (218) 727-1414.

Sept. 20, "Sheep Day," Morris Branch Station, Morris, (320) 589-1711

Oct. 1, 1 p.m.- 3 p.m., Agroforest Wisconsin Pasture Walk, East-Central Wisconsin, Geoff King, (920) 528-8773.

Oct. 11, "Combining Agriculture and Trees for Profit: Emerging Agroforestry Opportunities in Minnesota," Long Prairie, Jan Joannides, (612) 624-4299.

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.