

Sustainable Agriculture

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High interest in alternative ag marketing

The North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NCRSARE) program sponsored a highly successful alternative ag marketing conference in Lincoln, Nebraska Nov. 19-20, 1999. Nearly 400 farmers, members of non-profit organizations, agency representatives, and university and county extension faculty participated. The conference included locally produced food, exhibits, keynote speakers, panel discussions, and workshop sessions. Many speakers were farmers who shared their successes and failures in alternative marketing.

Here's what several Minnesotans learned at the conference:

- Much of alternative marketing is about building and maintaining strong relationships with distributors and customers. This means producing what they want and providing it efficiently and reliably.
- Farmers of all sizes are searching for alternative marketing methods. Participating in the same discussions and finding much common ground were small, part-time organic producers, farmers with large swine operations and everything in between. People are looking for ways to produce and market healthy food in an economically viable way.
- “The great thing about this conference was that many of the abstract things we’ve all heard so many times about marketing were made concrete,” said one participant. “For instance, I’ve heard many people say, ‘marketing is all about relationships.’ Well, what does that really mean? In Lincoln, I found out how farmers can develop and cultivate relationships with chefs, CSA [community supported agriculture] members, and customers.”
- If you consistently provide good quality and a positive buying experience, you can stop competing in terms of price for your produce, and start selling based on freshness, nutritional value, uniqueness, production practices, and good feeling. These are the real differences between locally, sustainably produced food and food “imported” by distributors and supermarkets from some other region or continent. So they’re what you need to promote.
- Customers often have to be taught to value these qualities, though, so selling your produce for what it’s worth can take a lot of communication. A great thing about this one-to-one relationship is that the education goes both ways: consumers find out about their food and why they should want to buy from the grower, the grower finds out what consumers want and can refine his/her offering to meet those demands.
- It is important to remember that planning and organizing are essential ingredients for success when starting a new marketing initiative. Don’t hesitate to read about direct marketing, or to contact those with experience. This will help you avoid many of the pitfalls as you begin.
- There is a big demand for pasture-reared chicken. Many people are doing it, but supply is still below demand. Portable processing vans have been developed to move from farm to farm to assist with processing. Everything left after processing goes in the compost heap.

Here are three websites with information on alternative marketing:

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program

www.sare.org

USDA Farm Direct Marketing

www.ams.usda.gov/directmarketing

Farm Options (University of Wisconsin—Extension)

www.uwex.edu/ces/agmarkets

Sustainable agriculture becomes “mainstream” at national conference

Conservation incentives for farmers as a top priority of the next farm bill garnered strong support at a recent national conference, according to Loni Kemp of The Minnesota Project. Kemp, who is also co-chair of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, was named by U.S. Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman to represent sustainable agriculture and environmental groups at the National Summit on Private Land Conservation Dec. 7 in Ames, Iowa.

The summit, attended by about 500 people, was preceded by a series of listening forums across the country to discuss the need for a new direction in USDA conservation programs. Kemp says, “Integrating profitability, environmental quality and community vitality was widely recognized as the proper goal for government policy.”

“Nothing less than a complete overhaul of the nation’s farm policy was called for,” Kemp says. “I believe several factors came together to cause this remarkable convergence of opinion.”

- Private landowners control 70 percent of the nation’s land, “so it is clear we need farmers’ help if we are ever going to deal with the critical environmental issues of today. USDA presented research results showing the unsettling data that no progress was made on erosion control since 1995,” Kemp says. “The ‘Dead Zone’ in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as half the nation’s rivers is polluted due to farm runoff. We are still draining more wetlands than we restore, and farmland is being paved over at the rate of three million acres a year. Farmers can help solve these problems, while producing food, by using federal payments to produce cleaner water, richer soil and better wildlife habitat.”
- “There appears to be plenty of money to achieve this,” Kemp says. “U.S. taxpayers spent \$22 billion to bail farmers out this year, with virtually no strings attached. At the same time, conservation funding is no higher than it was during the Depression, in constant dollars.”
- “Farmers constitute such a small portion of the population that future farm bills are going to have to depend on urban support for passage,” Kemp says. “Conservation of the environment and green spaces are values that most Americans fervently support, and a farm policy that supports them will be popular.”
- “Many of the officials at the conference had been in Seattle the previous week at the world trade talks,” Kemp says. “They might have gained some sympathy for the European and Japanese arguments that farmers mean so much more to their countries than just food production. These countries want to support farmers for other benefits, including beautiful landscapes, rural character and clean water. It makes sense.”

Kemp ((507) 743-8300, lkemp@tc.umn.edu) is also a former board chair of the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA).

Use cold treatment instead of chemicals to kill insects in stored crops

When stored crops deteriorate on a farm due to mold or insects, dollars disappear from the pockets of producers. Bill Wilcke, engineer with the University of Minnesota Extension Service, says producers can take steps this winter to protect stored crops.

He recommends the following:

- Aerate as needed to keep crops cool. But don't run fans continuously. That wastes electricity and could result in excess moisture loss.
- Check stored crops and aeration equipment regularly.
- Move unaerated piles before spring.
- Take action at the first sign of problems.

Winter offers the alternative of cold treatment instead of chemicals to kill insects in stored crops, notes Wilcke. "The normal suggested winter storage temperature is 20-30 degrees F, but holding the crop at 0 for at least five days will kill insects in all life stages," he says. "To kill insects, cool the stored crop to 0-20 degrees F as quickly as possible and hold at that temperature for several weeks. The approximate cooling time in hours will be equal to 15 divided by the airflow in cubic feet per minute per bushel. In late winter, aerate to bring the crop temperature back up to 20-30 degrees F."

Wilcke may be reached at (612) 625-8205, wwilcke@extension.umn.edu.

Farmers needed for Community Food Project

The Minnesota Grown Community Food Project addresses food and nutrition needs of low-income families by creating direct marketing linkages with Minnesota producers. The Community Food Project, funded by the Minnesota Legislature, is designed to facilitate purchase of products by participants directly from Minnesota producers. The intent is to create food access opportunities for both urban and rural families in Minnesota and to create direct markets for Minnesota growers. The project is now going into its third season and is looking for farmers who are interested in participating. For more information on becoming a Community Food Project vendor, please call the Minnesota Food Association at (612) 872-3298.

Pasture management home study course offered by U of M

Grazing management for both large and small producers is the subject of a six-lesson home study course offered by the University of Minnesota Extension Service this winter. Topics include planning a grazing system, fencing systems, plant species selection, weed management, managing season-long forage production and grazer arithmetic. There is a \$20 registration fee. Call the Pipestone County Extension office at (800) 967-2705 for more information.

Minnesota, Upper Midwest organic conferences in February, March 2000

The third annual Minnesota Organic Conference will be held at the Kelly Inn in St. Cloud Feb. 15-16, 2000 (Tu-Wed). Keynote speakers include Kathleen Merrigan, director of Marketing Services, USDA, on "Future Opportunities and Obstacles of Organics;" and Mark Ritchie, president of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, on "Genetic Engineering, Irradiation and Biotechnology." For information on the program, sponsorship or exhibiting, contact Doug and Janet Gunnink at (507) 237-5162, dgunnink@prairie.lakes.com.

The 11th annual Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference is March 16-18, 2000 (Th-Sa) at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. The theme is "Organic Agriculture at the Crossroad." To receive a conference flyer with complete information, call the voice mail line at (715) 772-6819, or check the website at <http://agile.net/UMOFC/>.

Calendar of events, 2000

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

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

Saturday, Jan. 15, **Free Range Poultry Production and Marketing**, Berlin Bowling Lanes, Berlin, Wis. Call (920) 294-6896.

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.

Wednesday-Thursday, Feb. 2-3, **Minnesota Grazing Conference**, Jackpot Junction, Morgan. 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. (715) 772-6819

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

About this newsletter...

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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.