

Sustainable Agriculture

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Grass snow fences offer safer roads, cheaper snow removal, farm income

Safer roads for drivers, lower snow removal costs for local governments and income for rural landowners . . . these are benefits of establishing native grasses in farm fields near roads to create “living snow fences.”

“The living snow fence program can earn up to \$100 per acre per year for 30 years for landowners,” says Gary Wyatt, Watonwan County educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. “The benefit-to-cost ratio is \$17 saved per dollar spent for a 30-year planting, based on only \$1 per ton for snow removal cost. And some snow removal costs are as high as \$3 per ton. Additional benefits come from safer highways, resulting in fewer accidents, less property damage, and fewer injuries and fatalities. Also, there are fewer transportation delays. These added benefits increase the benefit-to-cost ratio by four or five times.”

Wyatt says the living snow fence program is part of the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) established in the last federal Farm Bill. The legislation provided for living snow fence plantings of trees and shrubs, and now native grass plantings have been accepted as snow fences. “Some landowners hesitate to plant trees or shrubs in row-crop fields because of how this might affect land value or resale of the property,” says Wyatt. “And re-establishing crops after the program ends is easier with grasses than with trees or shrubs.”

There is no competitive bid process for the program. Landowners are paid based on the cash rental rates for the soil types on their land. In south central Minnesota, these cash rental prices are likely to range from \$90-110 per acre. Cost sharing of up to 50 percent for planting and establishment expenses is also available.

The program is offered through the Farm Service Agency (FSA), National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) offices in each county. After the winter of 1996-97, the state of Minnesota applied for and was awarded a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant to help establish more living snow fences.

Several counties have applied for these FEMA funds. The funds will increase farmer incentives to over \$3000 per acre, paid over 15 years, for a planting that will exist for 30 years.

Most of the plantings are 45 feet wide with two rows of trees or shrubs, or two 15-25-foot-wide strips of native grasses 4-5 feet tall. Switch grass, Indian grass, and big blue stem are the native grasses commonly used. “A strip 25 feet wide and 2000 feet long equals 1.15 acres,” says Wyatt. “If two strips are planted, the landowner is paid for 2.3 acres at \$3,000 per acre in FEMA counties. Thus, the landowner would receive \$6,900 per acre after 15 years for a planting that is contracted and would exist 30 years.”

More information on the living snow fence program is available from county FSA, NRCS, and SWCD offices in Minnesota.

Living snow fence technical guidebook available

Catch the Snow with Living Snow Fences is a new technical guidebook for the design, installation and maintenance of living snow fences and community shelterbelts. The 140-page guidebook comes in a 3-ring notebook and includes a CD-ROM for selecting plant material. To get your copy, call the U of M Extension Service Distribution center at (800) 876-8636. Ask for item 7311. Each guidebook sells for \$65 plus tax and shipping.

GM market access may be important seed choice factor

The trend toward market segregation for both corn and soybeans is likely to increase during the coming year. This means it's important to consider market access in seed choices, notes Terrance Hurley, economist with the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

The market for corn and soybeans appears to be evolving into three tiers, says Hurley. They are a domestic genetically modified (GM) market, an export GM market, and a non-GM market. The option to sell to one or more of these markets in the fall will be tied to the seed planted in the spring. Producers who plant GM seed approved by the U.S. but not by major trading partners will be able to sell grain only in the domestic GM market. Producers who plant GM seed approved by the U.S. and other countries can sell in both domestic and export GM markets. Producers who plant non-GM seed can sell in all three markets.

The cost of selling grain in each market may differ according to transportation, segregation, and certification costs. Transportation costs will depend on whether local elevators and processors accept grain for some or all three markets. Hurley says it may be possible to avoid increased transportation costs by planting seed that provides an option for greater market access. Producers may also be able to avoid some or all segregation and certification costs by selling in the domestic GM market.

“Planting non-GM seed provides the option of selling in all markets, and may result in a higher prices or lower transportation costs,” says Hurley. “However, greater market access does not guarantee higher profits. There can be a cost in having and using the option of greater market access. That cost is the difference in the expected net returns between non-GM and GM grain.”

“Before committing to plant GM or non-GM seed, producers need to evaluate the expected cost of obtaining the option for greater market access and exercising that option when it's time to sell,” Hurley concludes.

More information is available at www.extension.umn.edu. Click on Rural Response, then on the National Ag Risk Library and Handling and Marketing GMOs. You can also check with your county extension office.

Apply for USDA Sustainable Agriculture grants

Farmers can apply for grants of from \$5,000 to \$15,000 to conduct research or education/demonstration projects that further the goals of sustainable agriculture. The grants are from USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program in the North Central Region. Applications are due April 28, 2000.

Producers must reside in the 12-state North Central Region. Funds will be available in mid-fall for the 2001 crop production season. Call (402) 472-7081 or e-mail ncrsarE@unl.edu for an application. You can also find the application at www.sare.org/san/ncrsare.

New guide lays down the law for direct farm marketers

Farmers and ranchers involved or interested in direct marketing will find answers to pressing legal questions in the newly published Legal Guide for Direct Farm Marketing, written by law professor Neil Hamilton and funded by the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program.

“Direct farm marketing presents an important opportunity to farmers and consumers. This guide was written to help address legal questions producers might have about engaging in direct farm marketing,” said Hamilton, of the Drake University Agricultural Law Center. “The goal is to help make sure that legal uncertainties do not prevent people from exploring direct marketing opportunities.”

Funded by North Central Region SARE’s Professional Development Program, the Legal Guide answers common questions about laws on marketing products directly to consumers and to retail and wholesale buyers. Hamilton wrote the book for farmers involved in direct marketing produce, livestock and other food products, and for farm advisers, such as extension educators and attorneys working with farm marketers.

Throughout the book and in an appendix, Hamilton refers readers to contacts and resources across the nation, such as state and federal inspectors, organizations, Cooperative Extension offices, farmers, market directors and small business programs.

Hamilton has taught agricultural law for 18 years and has written a series of books and articles for farmers and lawyers. He also raises fresh vegetables on his Iowa farm for sale to restaurants.

The 235-page Legal Guide costs \$20. To order, contact the Drake University Agricultural Law Center at (515) 271-2947.

FarmConnect is a new producer-owned cooperative

An organization is being formed to help farmers earn a greater profit from what they produce. This effort is called FarmConnect (previously referred to as Minnesota Marketplace). FarmConnect is a producer-owned cooperative that will identify and create production and marketing opportunities to improve profitability for its members.

FarmConnect will connect production to market needs. This will benefit buyers and end-users by giving them access to significant numbers of producers capable of supplying the quantity and quality of product they desire.

A steering committee of farmers and farm leaders from throughout Minnesota has been meeting during the last year to study farm trends and organize FarmConnect. A board of directors comprised of farmers and by-laws are in place and a business plan has been written. A statewide membership drive for Minnesota farmers will begin mid-February.

For more information, contact Brent Sorenson, director of FarmConnect, at (218) 281-8449, bsorenson@farmconnect.com.

New publication on soil quality

A publication for non-soil scientists on issues and terminology of soil quality research is available from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Program, 90 W. Plato Blvd., St. Paul, MN 55107. Called Addressing the Soil System, a Soil Quality Literature Review, it's available at no charge. You can also call (651) 296-7673.

Calendar of events, 2000

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

Wednesday-Thursday, Feb. 2-3, **Minnesota Grazing Conference**, Jackpot Junction, Morgan. Doug & Janet Gunnink (507) 237-5162, dgunnink@prairie.lakes.com.

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

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.

Saturday, March 11, **Organic Growers and Buyers Association (OGBA) Annual Meeting**, Best Western Victorian Inn, Hutchinson. Contact Cheryl at (612) 424-2450, 1-800-677-6422, or ogba@mwt.net.

Thursday-Saturday, March 16-18, **Upper Midwest Organic Farming 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...

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.