

Sustainable Agriculture

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Farmer bargaining unit would increase economic power, economist says

Over 60 years of supply control in U.S. agriculture has left farmers with the least economic power among the major players in the food system sector, says a University of Minnesota economist. “This should not be surprising,” says Dick Levins, a farm management economist with the U of M Extension Service. “Programs such as land retirement were never intended to increase farmer economic power, nor have they been monitored to see if they were affecting economic power.”

But that doesn't mean we should abandon supply control, he adds. “In the New Deal era, Henry Wallace was on the right track in advocating a farmer bargaining unit to control supply,” Levins says. “A bargaining unit will increase economic power, which is the key to higher income for farmers.”

“Farmers will come to see the supply control program is not some annoying government regulation, but a collective action taken in everyone's best interest,” Levins says. “Peer pressure to conform to the action will be enormous. On the other hand, conforming is now seen as bending to government regulators that threaten farmer freedom.”

Levins would make one change to Wallace's prescription back in the 1930s. “Rather than calling for collective action to raise farm prices through supply control or other action,” he says, “I would call for collective action to raise farm income. “Higher farm income sounds a lot better than higher food prices. How much sympathy would union autoworkers get for going on strike for higher automobile prices?”

“The higher income argument can talk of redistributing profits in the system, rather than adding to household food bills. Farmers could also say they would gladly agree to produce more, not less, for the hungry if their income could be assured in the process.”

Levins says supply control is one of many strategies an effective farmer bargaining unit might take. “Without a bargaining unit, farmer income will not improve with supply control,” he says. “But with a bargaining unit, there's a much better chance of improving income for farmers.”

Discover farm profit niches with agroforestry practices

Agroforestry can help put “profits in your pockets,” according to a new University of Minnesota publication. Agroforestry incorporates trees and shrubs into agricultural systems to take advantage of new, profitable markets while improving land and the environment.

The new 20-page publication, “Discovering Profits in Unlikely Places: Agroforestry Opportunities for Added Income,” is available from county offices of the U of M Extension Service, or from the Distribution Center by calling (800) 876-8636 or (612) 624-4900. Ask for publication 7407.

It has details on the benefits of agroforestry, “before” and “after” full-color drawings of agroforestry practices, a list of commonly used trees and shrubs, and resources for more information. A team of agricultural producers, Extension educators and researchers developed the publication. It was produced by the Center for Integrated Natural Resource and Agricultural Management (CINRAM), the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) and the U of M Extension Service.

The publication tells how matching woody crops to your own unique conditions offers several ways to increase farm profits:

- Increased total production from your land. Wood, wildlife, specialty forest products, Christmas trees and products, landscape plants, herbs, nuts, seeds, fresh and dried fruit and honey are some of the alternative income sources.
- More income sources mean greater financial diversity and flexibility in your farming enterprise, thus reducing risk.
- Higher productivity of existing crops and livestock. Trees and shrubs provide cover and protection from wind and sun and can help manage soil moisture by trapping snow.
- Reduced costs. Providing wind protection can also have money-saving results, such as reduced ditch cleaning and snow removal costs, lower farmstead heating and cooling bills, and reduced irrigation and energy costs.

In addition, agroforestry can help conserve natural resources and create more pleasant places to live and work.

The bottom line: The combined increases in income and cost savings from agroforestry can make a big difference in a poor crop year, and can be a financial bonus in a good one...while enhancing your resources.

Most people who leave farming are ‘pulled’ off by higher wages, economist says

The majority of people who have left farming weren’t “pushed” by a dire farm economy or a series of bad crop years, says a University of Minnesota economist. Instead, they were “pulled” away by higher wages in the non-farm sector.

“My own case is a good example,” says Regents Professor Emeritus Vernon W. Ruttan. “After I finished college, my Dad and I talked about the possibility of me coming back to the farm. But we didn’t see how we could produce enough to support two families at an income level people were expecting at that time. So I was pulled off the farm, not pushed.”

“However, some people have been pushed out of farming,” Ruttan says. One widespread example is the advent of the cotton combine. During the latter part of the adoption process, many people were pushed. But predominantly, he says, it’s been a pull rather than a push scenario.

In terms of sustainability in agriculture, Ruttan says one needs to be specific. “Agricultural production has been sustained, but many rural towns have lagged in adjusting,” Ruttan says. “Many farm families like to shop in larger trade centers instead of locally, and towns need some income-generating activity other than agriculture to sustain themselves.”

Many rural areas have “too much infrastructure and too much government,” Ruttan says. “For example, if we were starting over we would not build as many miles of rural roads as we now have. But it’s hard to close them down.”

Ruttan has just completed a new book, “Technology, Growth and Development,” published by Oxford Press. It takes a worldwide perspective, and chapters include technical change in agriculture, the biotechnology industries, technology and the environment, and sustainable development.

Living snow fences are low-cost solution to drifting snow in rural areas

Blowing snow and an occasional blizzard are facts of life for most of us. But we can soften problems from drifting snow with low-cost living snow fences, which are designed plantings of trees, shrubs or native grasses. The financial savings in reduced snowplowing costs to local government can be huge. But more important, living snow fences can help keep rural roads open and emergency services available during Minnesota’s classic blizzards.

A publication available from the University of Minnesota Extension Service, “Catching the Snow with Living Snow Fences,” is a 140-page technical guidebook with information on proper design, installation and maintenance of living snow fences and shelterbelts.

The publication comes in a convenient three-ring notebook and includes a CD-ROM for selecting plant material. It’s available for purchase from county offices of the U of M Extension Service. Or, call the Distribution Center at 800-876-8636 or (612) 624-4900. Ask for publication 7311.

Apply for School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems

The University of Minnesota announces the third recruitment for the School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems. The Chair is designed to play the role of catalyst for innovation and progress on agricultural issues within the College of Agricultural, Food, and Environmental Sciences and throughout the State of Minnesota.

The position provides great latitude for candidates to define their particular activities within this context, but it is intended to address:

- Long-term societal values of rural communities and healthy agricultural landscapes.
- Identification of current and potential relationships between agriculture and rural communities, landscapes, and food systems.
- Models for sustainable agricultural systems at the local level in an international context.

There are no formal degree requirements. The position will be a non-tenure track or senior fellow position within the College of Agricultural, Food, and Environmental Sciences with a flexible appointment of one week to one year in duration. The position can be used to match sabbatical opportunities from other institutions and organizations.

For the appointment to begin in spring, summer, or fall 2001, applications must be received by March 2, 2001. Thereafter, applications will be accepted on an on-going basis through June 30, 2001. For more information contact the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) at (612) 625-1268, (800) 909-6472, or misamail@umn.edu.

U of M offers beef cattle value-based marketing home study course

A home study course for beef cattle producers on “Preparing for Value-Based Marketing” is available this winter from the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

The six-lesson course is for producers with both large and small operations. Lesson topics include feeder calf management for successful marketing, breed selection and breeding geared for value-based marketing, collecting and utilizing carcass information, marketing alternatives and making marketing decisions.

Registrations received by the Feb. 1 deadline will guarantee course enrollment. Additional information and registration forms are available from the Pipestone County Extension Office, 119 2nd Ave. SW, Suite # 2, Pipestone, MN; phone (800) 967-2705 or (507) 825-6715. There are also registration forms on the Internet at www.extension.umn.edu/county/pipestone. Click on the “Program” heading.

Calendar of events, 2001

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

Jan 12-13. **Farming for Profit, Land and Family—Holistic Management**, Assisi Heights, Rochester. Call the Land Stewardship Project, (507) 523-3366.

Jan. 20. **Minnesota Dairy Goat Conference**, Classroom Office Building, University of Minnesota, St. Paul. Call David Daubert, (952) 446-9321 or (952) 933-6520.

Jan. 24. **Is Grazing or Organic Dairying Right for Your Farm?** Holiday Inn, Alexandria, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Call Jim Salfer, (320) 255-6169 or (800) 450-6171.

Jan. 26-27. **3rd Annual Value Added Conference: Bring Profit Back to the Farm**, Eau Claire, Wis. Call Pam Herdrich at (715) 834-9672, or e-mail Pam.Herdrich@wi.usda.gov.

Jan. 31-Feb. 1 **Minnesota Grazing Conference**, Jackpot Junction, Morton. Call Doug or Janet Gunnink, (507) 237-5162, dgunnink@prairie.lakes.com.

Feb. 1-3 **Upper Midwest Regional Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference**, St. Cloud Civic Center. Call (763) 434-0400.

Feb. 8-9 **Minnesota Organic Conference**, St. Cloud Civic Center. Call Doug or Janet Gunnink, (507) 237-5162, dgunnink@prairie.lakes.com.

Feb. 23 **The Practice of Restoring Native Ecosystems**, Bunker Hills Regional Park, Andover, Minn. Sponsors include the National Arbor Day Foundation. Call (888) 448-7337, or check the Internet at www.arborday.org/rneseminar.

March 15-17 **Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference**, LaCrosse, Wis. Call (608) 734-3349.

March 15 & 29. **Commercial Fruit Processing Workshops**, Wadena, 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. on both dates. Call Mike Demchik, (218) 894-5196, mdemchik@forestry.umn.edu.

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.