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Many farm women pessimistic and fatalistic, study shows

A University of Minnesota study of 50 women involved in hog production found many of them pessimistic and "culturally depressed." About half of the women said they were unable to buy the things they need for their family.

"This isn't new for farm families, but the decline in their level of satisfaction with the farming lifestyle is a new trend," says Wynne Wright, rural sociologist at the U of M West Central Research and Outreach Center at Morris who conducted the study. Wright says about 65 percent of the women were less or much less satisfied with the income made from farming than they were five years earlier.

"It's important to keep in mind that the women we interviewed considered their families survivors of the massive drop in hog prices that swept the Midwest in 1998," Wright says. But income wasn't the only source of frustration.

"Over one-fourth of the women interviewed reported changes in their communities over the past five years that made them less desirable places to live," Wright says. "However, they were not interested in leaving their communities and 80 percent believed their lifestyle to be better or much better when compared to people living in town."

The fatalism expressed by many women in the study was based on the economic inevitability of market forces that many of them felt powerless to influence. Wright says, "Much of this fatalism comes from the lack of certainty about the market and the political climate. But it also comes from changes in the neighborliness of rural communities.

"Many hog farmers are finding not only the marketplace unagreeable, but neighbors and others who are impacted by confined swine feeding operations now have something to say about how hogs should be raised.

"This challenge to 'the right to farm as usual' is new and a source of community distress for many farm families. Women are often on the frontline to experience this tension since they are more typically responsible for managing the social and community life for the household."

Almost 40 percent of the women in the study were so disillusioned with the future of farming they were skeptical about passing the farm onto their children.

One woman said she would not recommend farming to her children "because the future will be crazy. The reasons why I liked it (farming) are going--everything is high tech and more involved." Another said, "the

stress and the mental health issues that people have to put up with--it's like selling your soul almost sometimes. It sounds drastic, but it's such an unfair exchange that I could not wish that on my kids."

For more information on the study, contact Wright at (320) 589-1711, or wrightw@mrs.umn.edu.

Producer premiums for organic and natural pork should last

Organic food sales have been increasing dramatically, but how long can the market continue to grow?

With organic and natural pork production, modest producer premiums are likely to continue over the long run, according to a study from the University of Minnesota Swine Center. The reason: "Increases in supplies (of organic pork) are unlikely to keep pace with expected increases in demand that cause higher prices," says U of M applied economist W. Parker Wheatley.

Wheatley recently completed the study by reviewing a number of previous studies done throughout the U.S. and talking to pork producers. He says demand is driven by the perceived safety of organic and natural products.

"Demand is also driven by the perception that organic products embody attributes related to improved environmental quality," Wheatley says. "As such, consumers view the premiums paid to organic producers as implicit rewards for reducing the pollution associated with production. An additional source of increased demand is the consumer perception that natural and organic production provides for improved animal welfare."

Actual premiums received by producers are hard to document, since no studies have been done. But Wheatley's discussions with two natural and organic pork producers and one marketing firm give you an idea.

"In fall of 2000, one processor/marketing firm paid \$6 per hundred over the mean market price for Iowa/Southern Minnesota with a minimum price of \$40 per hundred," he says. "The same firm will pay \$65 per hundred live weight for organic pork."

"Another national cooperative was paying an average of about \$50 per hundred live weight for organic pork. In its promotional material, the cooperative indicated a pricing policy based on production costs and maintenance of a fair price, which is independent of commodity pricing.

"One small-scale producer also does direct marketing and receives \$50 per hundred live weight. This same producer also handles all the processing and marketing in a separately held company.

"These premiums don't seem substantial given that market prices per hundred pounds live weight ranged between \$40 and \$50 in 2000," he says. "However, the premiums existed even when prices were lower in 1998 and 1999, and provided some stability to these producers' incomes."

The Minnesota Pork Producers' Association funded the project. For more information or a copy of the study, contact Wheatley at (612) 669-0331, whea0025@umn.edu.

Economist says new Farm Bill should have energy, industrial provisions

By Jerry Fruin, University of Minnesota Extension Service

The next Farm Bill should address energy and industrial uses, in addition to the traditional food and agriculture provisions.

In the 21st century we are evolving from an era of using coal and petroleum (energy originally from the sun that's been stored for 60 million years) to using biomass to quickly convert the sun's energy into usable energy forms. This will be economical, efficient and pollute less than extracting our finite coal and petroleum resources.

The next Farm Bill should have funding for both laboratory and field research to investigate new ways to utilize biomass energy. Also, payments should be available to help develop pilot energy plants and jump-start new biomass energy projects.

There are three potential sources of biomass energy: crops such as hybrid poplar and switchgrass; by-products such as cornstalks, wheat straw and sawdust; and finished products such as ethanol and biodiesel.

The recent alfalfa biomass energy project near Granite Falls, Minn. is an excellent example of biomass. However, it didn't get off the ground because it was too big--transportation costs were too high to transport the alfalfa up to 150 to 200 miles.

We know now that it's easier for such power plants to succeed if they operate on a 10 to 20-mile radius, producing 5 megawatts of power instead of 50 to 70 megawatts. The biomass crop should also be grown on marginal land, not prime farmland.

The Farm Bill should encourage market development and utilization of by-product crop residues such as corn stalks, wheat straw and sawdust for energy. Biodiesel fuel is also an attractive possibility. It contains a small amount (two to five percent) of a vegetable oil such as soybean oil mixed with diesel fuels.

Biodiesel reduces sulfur emissions and acts as a lubricant to improve engine performance.

The economics of biodiesel are far superior to those of ethanol. And since Minnesota is a state with a surplus of soybeans and soybean oil, adding soy oil to diesel fuel would help soybean prices.

Using biodiesel in Minnesota could jump-start the process across the Midwest and be a model for the rest of the nation. The Midwestern farm states need to take the lead in biodiesel--it's not going to come from the petroleum industry.

Biomass crops for energy--many of them grown on marginal land--will become more important. The world already has ample resources for producing food. Almost every developed country can raise enough calories to feed itself. Much of our world food trade involves trading "flavors" between countries.

In the longer term, biomass for energy will be the transition stage bridging the fossil fuel era with direct energy from the sun. Fuel cells or solar cells already are economical in some situations. For example, it can be more economical to use fuel cells in remote areas than to run two miles of copper wire. (Fruin may be reached at (612) 625-8720, fruin001@umn.edu)

New publications, CD-ROMs from Sustainable Agriculture Network

Recent publications and CD-ROMs are available from USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program and its outreach arm, the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN).

SAN has created an on-line "Directory of Expertise" to better connect people seeking information about sustainable agriculture with those practicing it. Check it out at www.sare.org/expertise.

New products include the book, "Managing Cover Crops Profitably," 2nd Edition, now available on CD-ROM. Also available on CD-ROM is "Reap New Profits: Marketing Strategies for Farmers and Ranchers PowerPoint Presentation for Educators." In addition, "Building Better Rural Places" describes and gives contact information for 80 federal programs offering support to farmers and others.

For more information, call (301) 504-6425 e-mail san@nal.usda.gov, or visit the website at www.sare.org.

Minnesota ranks first in producing organic corn, buckwheat

Minnesota is the top state in production of organic corn and buckwheat, according to a new report. The state is second in organic soybeans and flax production and third in organic small grains.

"The Status of Organic Agriculture in Minnesota 2001" report is available on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture website at www.mda.state.mn.us.

No ESAP field days on farms with cloven-hoofed livestock

The threat of foot-and-mouth disease has prompted cancellation of Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Program (ESAP) field days on farms with cloven-hoofed livestock. Wayne Monsen, grant program coordinator for ESAP, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, says other options can be used to spread the word about ESAP projects.

"One way is to have farmer meetings at restaurants or Extension office meeting rooms where you can share information about your projects," Monsen said in a letter to farm families with grant projects. "ESAP staff members are very willing to help organize farmer meetings and facilitate the discussions." Monson may be reached at (651) 282-2261, e-mail Wayne.Monsen@state.mn.us.

Calendar of events, 2001

May 21-23, **31st Annual BioCycle National Conference: Composting and Organics Recycling**, Radisson Riverfront Hotel, St. Paul. Call (610) 967-4135, or visit www.biocycle.net.

May 24-June 7, **Sustainable Agriculture Tour of Cuba and Haiti**. Call (415) 558-9486, ext. 231, or download an application at www.globalexchange.org.

June 27-28, **Streamside Grazing Schools**, held on farms in SE Minnesota and SW Wisconsin. Space is limited. Call (651) 653-0618, or e-mail caroline@mtn.org.

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.