

Sustainable Agriculture

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Could a global farming network bring economic power to farmers?

A network of farmers from throughout the world working together to build economic power is an interesting alternative to the rivalry and competitiveness we now see among farmers of different countries.

Farmers around the world have at least one thing in common: they must deal with multinational firms to sell their products and buy many of their inputs. “Growth and competition in agribusiness are not restricted to any one country,” says Dick Levins, economist with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. “We continue to think of large grain companies and other large multinational corporations as U.S. corporations, but their home base is the world, not any single country.”

“Farmers continue to identify themselves as being from one country or another, and to see their principal competition as coming from other countries,” Levins says in a recent paper presented at Grain World 2002 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. “I am especially saddened to see the animosity between farmers in my own country and in Canada.

“And the rivalry between farmers in the U.S. and those in South America over soybean exports is another example of a process that will eventually destroy both. Farmers, in my view, should see themselves primarily as farmers when they are conducting business matters and find other ways to honor their countries of origin.”

“We might write off the prospect of a global farmer network that builds economic power rather than global competition that reduces power as a dream,” says Levins. “But I’m encouraged that my recent articles on collective bargaining have found a wide audience among farmers. And the alternative of an agriculture serving nothing more than being efficient and cheap has failed to support rural economies.”

Rural policies that rely on agriculture as an economic and social foundation must be realistic about how many farmers it will take to provide a healthy environment, create a solid economic foundation for rural economies and produce the food we all need, Levins says. “We must recognize that our experiment in having relatively few farmers producing relatively cheap commodities cannot be judged a success if measured by the health and prosperity of our rural areas,” he adds.

In looking for a new vision for rural development, Levins says he found himself looking back. “The old vision, one in which agriculture provides the primary source of wealth in rural areas, is one I still find appealing. But for it to work, that wealth must remain in rural areas and not be drained off by distant enterprises that have superior market power,” Levins says.

“The rural development that I envision will be led by farmers, many more than we have now, and acting together in ways that allow them to protect the rural areas in which they live. We must put less emphasis on the ‘hook them up to the Internet’ school of rural prosperity, and more on capturing the value generated from the vast agricultural resources of our countryside.”

Levins may be reached at (612) 625-5238 or dlevins@apcc.umn.edu.

Pork production, marketing alternatives discussed at farmer meeting

Most swine research is still focused on large-scale, expensive confinement operations. However, there are some signs that lower cost alternatives are catching on, says Wayne Martin, coordinator of the University of Minnesota’s Alternative Swine Task Force.

“A million hogs a year are raised in hoops in Iowa now,” Martin says. “That’s just a small percentage of Iowa production, but that’s happened in just five years.” Martin spoke at a recent “Pig Power” meeting on alternative pork production and marketing in Granite Falls, Minn. sponsored by the Land Stewardship Project.

Kerkhoven area farmer Jim VanDerPol told other farmers at the meeting that he’d used farrowing crates for 15 years but switched to pasture farrowing and hoop buildings a few years ago. VanDerPol said working with the farrowing crates in a closed building was dirty, smelly, and hard on the hogs and he’d “never go back to crates.”

Some of the most exciting alternative swine research is taking place at the University’s West Central Research and Outreach Center (WCROC) in Morris, Martin says. Researcher Rebecca Morrison has four hoop houses set up—one for gestating sows, two for growing pigs and one for sorting and handling pigs.

“The workers at the Morris swine facilities said they prefer the fresh air of the hoop buildings over conditions in confinement housing,” Martin says. “And some farmers at the meeting said there’s less work with hoop buildings since there are no power washing requirements. Power washing is a dirty, time-consuming job.”

Researcher Morrison says the major disadvantage to the deep-straw systems is that regular hauling of bedding increases labor requirements. On the other hand, she says deep straw systems are less of a threat to the environment, better for the hogs and offer a more pleasant working environment. Another advantage: deep-bedded systems can be built for about a third of the per-pig cost of constructing a confinement operation, according to an Iowa State University study.

Another advantage to alternative systems is they make it possible to raise antibiotic-free pork, said Julie Carlson, a farmer and pig buyer for Niman Ranch, a California-based natural meats company. Niman buys antibiotic-free pork from 200 farm families in seven states. The company pays a premium for the pork, which must be raised by family farmers who are using stringent production guidelines.

Closer to home, Correll hog farmer Bennett Zierke described how he delivers his pork direct to consumers in 40 different Minnesota towns, as well as 10 different sites in the Twin Cities.

Byrce Oates, a farmer who works with Patchwork Family Farms in Missouri, said his organization has had good luck getting pork into both white tablecloth restaurants and grocery stores. Patchwork was started by the Missouri Rural Crisis Center to help family farmers who are raising pork using alternative

methods. Oates said they've learned their pork can't compete head-to-head with major brand labels in the freezer case.

"Basically the big meat companies buy shelf space and your product will get shoved to the back," he said. "You have to have separate freezer space and separate signage in the store."

—Adapted from a Land Stewardship Project article, available at www.landstewardshipproject.org. Martin may be reached at (612) 625-6224.

Cornell University has new energy conservation initiative

Cornell University at Ithaca, N.Y., has announced a new energy-conservation initiative aimed at cutting energy costs and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The university's Cornell Kyoto Task Team organized the initiative, a committee of students, faculty, and staff formed last fall in response to student requests for a more aggressive energy-conservation policy. Cornell has committed to meeting the goals agreed upon at the 1997 Kyoto Climate Change Conference in Japan, which call for a seven percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions levels by 2010. The current U.S. administration has rejected the agreement, which was signed by President Bill Clinton but not ratified by the Senate.

Before the university closed down for the December 2001 holidays, mass e-mails and posters reminded faculty, staff, and students to turn off lights and electrical devices before going on vacation. The result was a reduction of more than 360,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity during the 10-day period, resulting in a \$25,000 reduction in energy costs compared with the previous winter holiday.

"Our challenge, together with the Kyoto Now! students, is to encourage the campus community to reduce their energy use and to work with them to take existing systems and make them use less," said Lanny Joyce, Cornell's manager of engineering, planning, and energy management, who heads the Kyoto Task Team.

Cornell has also fitted its hockey rink with new, adjustable lighting fixtures that allow for more energy-efficient use and has initiated efforts to include solar panels in a future office remodeling project. Students are exploring this technology for new residence halls. The university hopes for a subsidy to help pay for the purchase of solar panels.

Cornell's vice president of administration and chief financial officer, Harold D. Craft Jr., said the emissions-reduction target is a challenging one for the university, since it has grown since 1990 and has a number of significant building projects under way.

"The campus community has submitted many energy conservation ideas and suggestions, several of which are now being acted on," Craft said. He said two of the university's mechanics are at work on a preventive maintenance and recommissioning program for Cornell's heating, ventilating, and air conditioning systems.

The university says other energy-saving measures are in the works:

- Labeling light switches with reminders to turn them off when not in use.
- Persuading users to institute the "powersave" mode on their computers.

- Adjusting vending machine power-saving controllers to minimize use of standby electric power.
- Modifying university design and construction standards to promote cost-effective energy conservation features in new construction.

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Siehl Prize for Excellence in Agriculture nominations due May 1

The College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences invites nominations for the Siehl Prize for Excellence in Agriculture. The deadline is May 1, 2002. Three Siehl Prize recipients will receive monetary awards of \$50,000 each to recognize and to reward the extraordinary work of an individual or team in agriculture in one of three categories: production, agribusiness, or academic/knowledge. The nominee must currently reside or must have resided in Minnesota for a period of at least five years or hold a degree from the University of Minnesota.

The prize is in keeping with the spirit of philanthropist Eldon Siehl, who wanted to address the importance of agriculture in the production of food and the alleviation of world hunger.

Further information on the prize and the nomination form can be found at the College's website www.coafes.umn.edu/siehlprize. Or, call (612) 625-5706 to have a brochure mailed to you.

Nominations sought for 3rd annual Seventh Generation Research Award

May 1 is also the deadline for nominations for the Seventh Generation Research Award. This national award recognizes people who work to further develop sustainable agriculture. It's sponsored by the Center for Rural Affairs and the Consortium for Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education. Applications are available at www.cfra.org. You can also call (541) 687-1490, or e-mail centerwest@qwest.net.

First 'Living Green Expo' April 27 emphasizes environmental choices

Minnesota's first Living Green Expo is Saturday, April 27 at the State Capitol Grounds and Armory. It's a free Earth Week family event that explores fun, food, earth-friendliness and future trends through workshops, exhibits and demonstrations.

For more information, visit www.livinggreenexpo.org or call Ned Brooks, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, (651) 296-8709.

Calendar of events, 2002

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

May 21-22. **Application of By-products as Soil Amendments**, Cloquet Forestry Center, (218) 879-0858.

July 14-17. **American Forage and Grassland Council Annual Conference/Trade Show**, Best Western Thunderbird Hotel/Convention Center, Bloomington, Minn., www.afgc.org.

Aug. 21. **Digesters for Managing Animal Waste**, Holiday Inn, St. Cloud, (651) 645-6159, x21, or cnelson@mnproject.org.

What we're about

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Also check MISA's home page at www.misa.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.**

To stimulate thinking and discussion about sustainability, we try to present items that reflect different points of view. This being the case, we aren't promoting and don't necessarily agree with everything we publish.