

Sustainable Agriculture

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Make 2003 a more profitable year for your farm

By Zachary Fore, University of Minnesota Extension Service

There are few things so good they cannot be improved. Your farm probably falls in this category.

And there are few people so wise they cannot learn. All of us fall in this category. With the 2002 crop year behind us, it is time to reflect, learn and determine how to make 2003 a more successful and profitable year. During and immediately after harvest, while observations made on the combine are fresh in your mind, is the best time to assess your operation.

What did you do in 2002 that worked well? What didn't work well? What did other farmers do that did or did not work well? Write down all your observations. (It is important that you physically write down your observations on real paper).

Doing small things a little better. I believe that this yearly assessment of what is working and what isn't is critically important. Why? Because I believe that the future success of most farms is a matter of doing a lot of small things a little better each year, not doing a few big things a lot better. Agriculture is a very competitive business.

Although we have recently seen some higher commodity prices, it is unlikely these higher prices will continue for long. Richard D. Taylor, Won W. Koo and Andrew L. Swenson, agricultural economists at North Dakota State University, recently published an article titled "2002 North Dakota Agricultural Outlook: Representative Farms, 2002-2011." (You can get the article at this web address: agecon.lib.umn.edu/cgi-bin/detailview.pl?paperid=5290).

Looking very far into the future is an uncertain business, but these economists use past price and yield trends and the new farm program to estimate farm profitability up to 2011. Their conclusion is that, on the average, net farm income will decrease and debt-to-asset ratios will increase for farms of all size and profitability categories. That's the bad news.

The good news is that there is opportunity to continually improve and to be better than average. A key part of beating the odds is to do a yearly, in-depth farm assessment--learn from what is working and what isn't, and then make the needed changes.

Some excellent farm planning resources are available. Here are a few: "Discover Your Priorities: Develop a Needs Assessment," and "Strategic Planning: Drafting a Blueprint for Your Farm Business," by James Hanson and Dale Johnson, University of Maryland, at www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/Publications/Category.cfm?ID=1.

Another is "A Strategic Management Primer for Farmers," by Kent Olson, . Olson is an Extension farm management economist at the U of M.

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New website for Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships

The University of Minnesota's Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships program has a newly revamped website. Check it out at www.regionalpartnerships.umn.edu.

The Regional Partnerships were initiated in 1997 to extend University resources to rural communities for the purpose of fostering sustainable development. In partnership with the University, citizens in these communities work through regional boards to develop and support programs and projects that strengthen natural resources, agriculture and tourism.

There are five Regional Partnerships in Minnesota: Central, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast and West Central. Features of the new website, www.regionalpartnerships.umn.edu, include:

- An easily recognizable logo and identity for all regions.
- A click-on map showing where the Regional Partnerships are located that quickly connects you to information about each region.
- Expanded, easier to find contact information.
- A listing of over 175 projects funded by the Partnerships that can be accessed through a searchable database of projects or through regional websites.
- Updated information on the Partnership's statewide community/University ventures in local foods and local energy.
- A searchable database of university and community partners.
- Links to related University and non-University programs.
- A section on the guiding principles for the Regional Partnerships.

The Regional Partnerships are a program of the U of M Extension Service; the College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences; and the College of Natural Resources. For more information about the program, contact Cynthia Pansing, statewide coordinator, at (612) 625-9759 or pansi001@umn.edu.

Check "Research Profiles" on the MISA site

Go to MISA's website at www.misa.umn.edu, then click on "Research Profiles." You'll see how U of M researchers in the College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences are working on a variety of topics that are important for building sustainable agriculture systems.

Daniel Ungier, a MISA intern in 2002, wrote the profiles. They include:

- Tracing the Path of Antibiotic Resistance
- Putting Alfalfa to Work in the Environment
- Finding Options for Organic Poultry Feed
- Breeding Forages for Landscape Diversity
- Designing Cropping Systems for Soil Health
- Learning How to Learn Weed Management

"National Organic Agriculture Standards" satellite broadcast is March 21

Washington State University Cooperation Extension and the Washington State Department of Agriculture are offering a satellite broadcast focused on the National Organic Agriculture Standards. It will address the implications they pose for Extension agents, state and national certification staff consultants and others involved in the production of organic commodities.

The broadcast will present the basic requirements of the USDA's National Organic Standards, and describe how the new regulations affect organic producers. The program will be aired on March 21, from 10 a.m. to noon, Pacific time. Viewers will have an opportunity to have their questions answered during the broadcast. For program details and registration information, go to ext.wsu.edu/noas/.

Levins is commended for media work

Richard A. Levins, Extension economist and professor in the Department of Applied Economics, has been recognized for his outreach efforts through the news media. Levins is a member of the Food and Society Policy Fellows program of the Thomas Jefferson Agricultural Institute. Executive Director Robert L. Myers of the Jefferson Institute says Levins has reached an estimated 3.27 million people through print media and the Internet alone. Levins has also been on a number of nationwide radio and television programs and in 2002 had over 20 speaking engagements in the U.S., Canada and England.

"Your media work has elicited many responses, both formal letters to the editor and personal correspondence from farmers, academics, government officials and citizens," Myers says. "They expressed both concern with the continual loss of market power for farmers and support for collective bargaining. Responses have come from such far-reaching places as Brazil, the United Kingdom and South Africa."

McDonald's switches to organic milk in UK

McDonald's is selling cartons of organic milk in its United Kingdom outlets. In early February the chain switched to selling carton milk only from organic dairy farms in Great Britain. It said the move was a "natural progression," having already changed to free-range eggs in its breakfasts.

McDonald's already sells organic milk and ice cream at its outlets in Sweden. See www.ananova.com/business/story/sm737567.html?menu= for more information.

Trauger Groh is keynote speaker at SFA conference

The Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) of Minnesota will hold its 12th annual statewide conference Feb. 22, 2003 at the Holiday Inn in Duluth. Author and noted speaker Trauger Groh will give the keynote address.

Groh is known for his views on healthy ecosystems, sustainability of agriculture, organic, CSAs, biodynamic farmers and the importance of animals on the farm. One of his writings, "The Case for Butter," can be found at www.realmilk.com/butter.html. He is co-author of "Farms of Tomorrow," which emphasizes our need to maintain linkage to farming traditions for both personal and societal health.

Groh was raised in Germany at several Waldorf schools. He took on his grandfather's farm in northern Germany, running it organically as well as biodynamically. He began lecturing in the U.S. and Canada in

1979 on the socio-economic aspects of agriculture as well as the spiritual aspects of farming. He moved to Wilton, N.H. in 1985 and with his wife, Alice Bennett Groh, founded the Temple/Wilton Community Farm as a venture that serves the local community and is supported by it. He has published his work widely in the U.S., Europe and Russia.

The conference will begin at 10 a.m. with Groh's keynote address titled, "Covering the Costs of the Farm Without Compromising Our Ideals." He will address incorporating values into decision-making in our farm operations and using those decisions to build toward a more sustainable future.

The keynote address will be followed by a variety of small group sessions where SFA farmer-members will present information on how they are creating local food systems in Minnesota, creating new markets and producing for those markets.

Groh will also lead a special two-hour intensive special workshop for those interested in community-supported agriculture--starting up and managing a CSA. This session will take place in the afternoon and is limited to 40 pre-registrants. It requires a fee in addition to the conference registration.

Farmer-presenters and their topics include:

- David Abazs, developing the sustainable agriculture curriculum for young people.
- Gene Lourey, the Nemadji Food Council, a unique community based initiative linking a local business with community food needs as well as farmers.
- A dairy marketing options panel, including Dave and Florence Minar of Cedar Summit Farms, Tim Wightman of Clearview Acres and a representative from Pastureland.
- John Fisher-Merrit, season extension and CSAs.
- Jon Evert, the state of farming in Northwestern Minnesota.

Other presenters and topics include JoAnne Berkenkamp, on a national initiative funded by the Kellogg Foundation called the "Learning Communities Project," which is an effort to support communities in building local food projects; an update from The Minnesota Project on the Conservation Reserve Program; and an overview from the Northland Food and Farming Initiative.

A noon meal of regionally produced foods of the Lake Superior region will be served. An exhibit area will be available for organizations and businesses to display materials and products that are of interest to conference attendees.

For further conference information, or to request a flyer with complete pre-registration information, contact one of these people: Jan O'Donnell (218) 722-1414 (office) or (715)-635-5250 (home), sfa@skypoint.com; Joel Rosen (218) 389-3306; or Mary Hanks (651) 296-1277.

The conference flyer and updates will be posted on the SFA of Minnesota website at www.sfa-mn.org.

What we're about

This newsletter is supported by the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA). It's also supported by the University of Minnesota Extension Service, the North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NCRSARE) Professional Development Program (PDP), and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). MISA is a partnership between the Sustainer's Coalition and the University of Minnesota College of Agricultural, Food, and Environmental Sciences (COAFES).

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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.