

Sustainable Agriculture

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More Farmers Involved in Agricultural Research, Education

Greg Johnson, a University of Minnesota weed scientist, spoke about the role of farmers in agricultural research and education at the last Southern Experiment Station field day. Greg suggested that the wisdom of farmers be included as part of the study of agricultural systems. The uses of farmers' ideas and experiences in research and education are receiving more attention in Minnesota.

With many changes taking place in agriculture, researchers and educators are hard-pressed to keep ahead of the needs of farmers. Areas of agriculture that are shortest on agricultural experts seem to be the first to include farmer participation in research and education projects. The Minnesota Forage and Grassland Council uses farmers in research and education to help make up for the lack of forage and grassland experts. The Forage Council always includes farmers on their board and uses them to help plan and run programs. Extension Educator Lisa Axton (Becker County) says she has enjoyed working with the Forage Council because of the active participation of both farmers and other people who work with forages.

Sustainable agriculture often includes farming practices that have received little recent attention from experts. Education and research programs in sustainable agriculture frequently include a high level of farmer participation. Farmers interested in sustainable agriculture have conducted their own on-farm research, organized field days and spoken at many workshops.

Extension has been moving away from the expert approach to education. Extension educators are now concentrating on facilitating education and meeting emerging needs of farm communities. The old approach to extension education, where the educators usually did the talking and the farmers usually did the listening, is changing.

Examples of the increasing commitment of extension and the University of Minnesota to farmer participation include:

- Extension educators working side by side with farmers on demonstration farms under two special extension programs, the Dairy Initiative and the Minnesota River Initiative.
- Plans to make farmers part of research teams that are being developed by the Minnesota Institute of Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) and University researchers like Greg Johnson.
- Assigning more researchers to regional experiment stations where they can have more contact with farmers.

Farmers are very good resources for studying farming systems because they operate farming systems. Many agricultural experts lack the general understanding of farming necessary to operate a farm. Also, farmers are aware of many important details of farming practices that may be overlooked by researchers and can be valuable for planning research and education projects.

Farmers themselves can benefit from working with experts on projects. When farmers cooperate with scientists and educators they increase their understanding of agricultural research and education. By working in teams with experts, farmers can get more access to important information. And, they can help direct research and education programs into areas most useful to them and to everyone in agriculture.--by Jim Tjepkema, acting extension educator, Nicollet County (507) 931-6800

Get the Latest CRP Information via Gopher

The latest information on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) options is available to farmers and landowners through the Minnesota Extension Service "gopher." Your county extension educator can access the gopher. Or, if you can access the World Wide Web or Gopher, here are the addresses:

WWW: <http://www.extension.umn.edu/>

Gopher: Host: gopher.mes.umn.edu Port 70

Then go to "Extension related gophers." You'll find an entry for the Conservation Reserve Program. Several articles are written by Bob Byrnes, Lyon County extension educator.

Nearly two million acres of Minnesota farmland have been idled under the CRP program, Byrnes says. But the 10-year contracts are due to expire beginning in 1996. Landowners whose CRP contract is set to expire have several decisions to make. Possible uses of the land include: return it to the crops that were grown before; grow different crops; keep the land in grass that now covers it, then harvest hay for sale or for livestock; use existing grass for pasture; use the land for recreation purposes (for the landowner, friends or customers).

Other possible uses: leave the land idle and gain no direct income from it, but continue to pay the property taxes; enter the land into some other government program, such as a new CRP, that would pay for continued retirement; count former CRP lands kept in grass cover as set-asides under the federal farm program (if the 1996 and subsequent year rules permit this).

The gopher provides information on other CRP research and educational activities in Minnesota and neighboring states. It also reports on activities of the Minnesota inter-agency CRP Leadership Team. For more information, including adding articles to the Gopher, contact the chair of the leadership team: Bill Wilcke, U of M Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering Dept., 1390 Eckles Ave., St. Paul, MN 55108, (612) 625-8205, e-mail: wwilcke@extension.umn.edu

Non-farm Students Learn About Sustainable Agriculture

The class assignment: write a story about sustainable agriculture. And some of the students were scared.

"Even with my farm background, sustainable agriculture was not familiar to me," one student wrote. "Imagine how the majority of the class felt—those lacking agricultural backgrounds. But we quickly learned that sustainable agriculture applies to more people than farmers."

That's what one University of Minnesota student wrote after a presentation by Don Olson, sustainable agriculture coordinator for the Minnesota Extension Service. Most of the 18 students are majoring in Scientific & Technical Communication in the university's College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences.

Olson showed the video, "Sustainability: The Quiet Revolution" to the mostly urban students. They saw Dave Serfling, Preston, Minn. farmer, talk about the importance of his family's quality of life, diversification of the farm business and using corn cobs for home heating—a yearly saving of \$1,700.

Other students wrote:

- "Sustainable farmers are entrepreneurs. They are very ingenious and have great managerial skills."
- "There is nothing magic about sustainable agriculture. It's just good common sense."
- Sustainable agriculture is based on the idea that a farmer is to be a steward of the land, be profitable and provide a high quality of life for his family and community.
- Agribusiness is positioning itself for a sustainable future. "It's here...it's coming fast. We used to see products like Prowl and Slam. Now we see Resolve, Contour and Detail. Agribusiness is definitely softening their approach."
- The relationship between producers and the Extension Service is now "a two-way interaction instead of a top-down, sage-on-the-stage approach."

FINPACK Helps Farmers Track Financial, Production Trends

A newly revised software tool from the University of Minnesota can help producers by tracking financial and production trends.

FINPACK, developed by the Center for Farm Financial Management at the University of Minnesota, has been used by thousands of agricultural producers across the U.S. to develop financial statements, alternative (what if) plans, cash flow plans and annual financial and production analyses. The latest FINPACK release includes a historic database component that allows users to create reports on any historical financial or production information for their farm or ranch.

The personal version of FINPACK retails for \$295. It's user-friendly and comes with a comprehensive user's manual and toll-free technical support. Hardware requirements include an IBM or compatible computer, MS-DOS 3.1 or higher and 640K of RAM. For more information, write Center for Farm Financial Management, 249 Classroom Office Building, 1994 Buford Ave., St. Paul, MN 55108 or call (800) 234-1111 or (612) 625-1964.

Dairy Goat Conference at U of M Will Be Jan. 13, 1996

Producing milk and meat from dairy goats will be the focus of a Dairy Goat Conference at the University of Minnesota's St. Paul Campus Jan. 13, 1996. It's designed for anyone interested in any phase of dairy goat production, including those deciding whether to raise goats. For a conference brochure or additional information, contact Leon Meger at 1-800-367-5363 or (612) 625-1214.

Conference for Sheep Producers Will Be Dec. 1-2 in St. Cloud

Successful and profitable sheep production will be the focus of a conference Dec. 1-2 in St. Cloud. The 1995 Shepherd's Holiday and Small Flock Conference will be at the Best Western Kelly Inn. The Minnesota Lamb and Wool Producers Association is the sponsor. Speakers are sheep experts from Minnesota and across the nation, including several from the University of Minnesota.

Preregistration is encouraged. The conference includes a banquet and a trade show. Among the speakers are Dan Waldron, Texas A & M animal scientist; Wayne Purcell, Virginia Tech economist; Yves Berger, Wisconsin researcher; and Bill Head, Robert Jordan and Cindy Wolf of the U of M.

Fees range from \$5 to \$35. Contact George Mead, (612) 682-4626; Dale Carter, (218) 463-1052; or John Essame, (507) 925-4415.

Biological Control Specialist Wins World Food Prize

Swiss entomologist Hans R. Herren, credited with operating the largest and most successful biological control program in the world, has been awarded the World Food Prize. His work in Africa focused on the cassava mealybug, a pest that destroys important food crops in the tropics.

The mealybug was introduced into Africa in the early 1970s with the import of high-yield South American varieties. It thrived because it had no natural enemies until Herren and colleagues propagated a South American wasp that destroys it. After seven years the wasps brought the mealybug under control in 30 nations.

Iowa State University oversees the prize, which is sponsored by a foundation established by Iowa businessman John Raun.

New Listing of Sustainable Agriculture Periodicals

Sustainable Agriculture in Print: Current Periodicals is a new directory of journals, magazines, newsletters and other serial publications. It's published by the Alternative Farming Systems Information Center at the National Agricultural Library.

The center also has a "Current List of Information Products" that tells you how to get their free publications. They're available in either hardcopy or electronic format. For more information, contact Jane Potter Gates, 304 National Agricultural Library, 10301 Baltimore Blvd., Beltsville, MD 20705-2351.

We Can Use Your Story Ideas

Keep the story ideas coming. 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 are Helene Murray (612) 625-0220, Don Olson (612) 625-9292 and Bill Wilcke (612) 625- 8205.

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.