

# *Sustainable Agriculture*

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## **New strategic plan emphasizes farmer participation, business planning**

The Minnesota Extension Service (MES) strategic plan for sustainable agriculture emphasizes farmer participation, business planning and continued dialogue with the sustainable agriculture community. Strategic objectives are to:

- Continue the dialogue with the sustainable agriculture community on important issues to be addressed.
- Develop partnerships with Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) chapters and other sustainable producer groups to develop programs.
- Continue to work closely with the Minnesota Institute of Sustainable Agriculture (MISA).
- Increase the involvement of farmers in research and education programs.
- Develop educational tools such as decision cases for train-the-trainer programs.
- Evaluate the impact of activities and adoption of sustainable agriculture concepts.

Thus far, the sustainable agriculture sector focus has been on production advances. However, producers and processors need to plan for increased financial success of the business rather than focusing strictly on increased production. Many sustainers are seeking to add value to products by networking and farming new crops. Many producers need help with business strategy development, business planning, developing markets, and securing funding and implementing plans.

To address these needs, the MES is working with MISA to coordinate development of a network among producers, bankers, university faculty, extension specialists and related agency personnel. The goal: help producers improve their ability to develop and manage marketing relationships for greater profitability.

Objectives of the 1996-1999 educational focus are to:

- Develop and adapt training materials to assist producers with writing business plans, marketing plans and financial proposals.
- Provide training to at least 200 producers by training at least 10 trainers to conduct the courses on an ongoing basis within two years.
- Share the materials with other regions of the country.

"In the next two years we'll spend a lot of time helping sustainers with business planning, value added products and developing processing cooperatives," says Don Olson, coordinator of the MES sustainable agriculture initiative. For more information, contact Olson at (612) 625-9292, 146 COB, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108. E-mail: [dolson@extension.umn.edu](mailto:dolson@extension.umn.edu)

## **Cause of deformed frogs is hard to determine, researchers say**

It's a mystery why there were large numbers of deformed frogs at three Minnesota locations last year, researchers say. Deformed frogs were confirmed at sites near Henderson, on both sides of the Minnesota River, and northeast of Litchfield. Unconfirmed reports, not verified by collections, have been reported at several other locations. Some baby frogs had two front legs but only one back leg, some had no eyes while others had three or four back legs.

Researchers working on the project are Judy Helgen and Mark Gernes of the Minnesota Pollution Control (MPCA) and Robert McKinnell, a geneticist with the University of Minnesota. Frogs are good biological indicators, and Helgen and Gernes are involved in the investigation since they're developing a biological index for wetlands water quality.

The scientists say the deformed frogs are probably the result of developmental abnormalities rather than heritable mutations. Possible causes are many, including agents from older types of pesticides, or even a parasite. Body tissues are being analyzed to determine if they had high levels of pesticides or substances such as arsenic and mercury. Helgen and Gernes are working with several cooperating labs that are providing analysis on sediments, water and frogs. The research will take three or four months to complete and analyze, and will be continued next spring if funding is available.

It's a low budget project. The deformed frogs were discovered by Cindy Reinitz, a teacher at the Minnesota New Country School, and her students. They've helped in the investigation by making collections of the frogs and reporting observations such as where the frogs may have gone to overwinter.

For more information contact Judy Helgen, MPCA, (612) 296-7240, or Bob McKinnell, U of M, (612) 624-6114

## **National PSA campaign promotes sustainable agriculture to farmers**

If you've heard a radio announcement promoting sustainable agriculture, here's the deal: It's probably part of a national public service announcement (PSA) campaign from the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). The new radio spots feature several farmers discussing their reasons for switching to sustainable agriculture techniques. CSPI sent the 30- and 60-second messages to 750 farm-oriented radio stations in 26 states.

CSPI's campaign is designed to link farmers who have been thinking about a transition to sustainable farming with knowledgeable experts who can help them. The PSA encourages farmers to call a toll-free number (1-800-346-9140) operated by Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas, a technical support program sponsored by the National Center for Appropriate Technology.

CSPI is a national consumer advocacy organization specializing in food and nutrition issues. For more information, contact Rebecca Kapstein at (202) 332-9110, extension 349.

## **Midwest Organic Alliance launches consumer marketing campaign**

The Midwest Organic Alliance is starting a consumer marketing campaign in the Twin Cities in February, 1996. The alliance is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1995 through a \$1.25 million three-year grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. The alliance will work to develop the supply of certified

organic products in the five-state region of Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota and South Dakota. The alliance also strives to develop consumer demand for organic foods in the Minneapolis and St. Paul market.

The Pew Charitable Trusts is a national and international philanthropy and the country's largest private environmental funder. For more information, contact the Midwest Organic Alliance, North Plaza Bldg., Suite 208, 5217 Wayzata Blvd., St. Louis Park, MN 55416, (612) 593-2790. E-mail: Moa7@aol.com

### **Expanded approach needed for protecting crops from pests**

Chemical pesticides have been used widely since the 1940s to protect food crops and forests from insects, diseases, and weeds. But their use has had some unfortunate consequences. Consumer concerns about food safety and environmental risks have caused the federal government to regulate or outlaw use of some pesticides, while pests' increased resistance has limited the effectiveness of many insecticides, fungicides, and herbicides.

There is an urgent need for an alternative pest-management approach that takes advantage of ecological processes, concludes a new report from a committee of the National Research Council's Board on Agriculture. A medley of strategies--traditional practices such as the use of crop rotation, beneficial organisms, genetically engineered crop varieties, and "narrow-spectrum" pesticides designed to target specific pests--should be considered as options to broad-spectrum pesticide use.

The National Research Council is the operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering. It provides independent advice on science and technology issues under congressional charter.

ECOLOGICALLY BASED PEST MANAGEMENT: NEW SOLUTIONS FOR A NEW CENTURY will be available in March from the National Academy Press for \$49.95 plus shipping charges of \$4 for the first copy and \$.50 for each additional copy. Call (202) 334-3313 or 1-800-624-6242.

### **SFA annual meeting set for Duluth Feb. 23-24**

Laura Freeman is president of Laura's Lean Beef, a \$20 million per year business in Kentucky that started as a family stocker operation 10 years ago. Her company sells high quality, grass fed beef into the major markets of the country, and she'll be the keynote speaker at the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) annual meeting at the Radisson Hotel in Duluth Feb. 23-24.

The cattle are fed only natural feeds; no antibiotics or growth hormones are allowed. Laura's Lean Beef know how to raise these cattle and they're also good at marketing them. Laura Freeman will also present two workshops at the SFA meeting.

The meeting starts with registration at 8:30 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 24. A family day is scheduled for Friday, Feb. 23. For more information, contact Tim King, Rt. 2-Maple Hill, Long Prairie, MN 56347, (612) 732-6203.

## **Farming systems conference set for March 8 in Calmar, Iowa**

"Expanding the Toolbox: Farming systems and Learning Approaches," is a one-day conference March 8 at the Northeast Iowa Community College in Calmar. It will feature success stories on enterprises for family farm agriculture and teamwork approaches for non-farmer agriculture professionals. It's designed for producers, Extension and Natural Resource Conservation Service personnel, and others in the tri-state area. A follow-up three-state bus tour is scheduled for summer. For more information, contact Rick Exner, 2104 Agronomy Hall, ISU, Ames, IA 50011, (515) 294-1923. E-mail [dnexner@iastate.edu](mailto:dnexner@iastate.edu)

## **Great Lakes Grazing Conference Feb. 19-20 in Battle Creek, Mich.**

Nationally-known farmers, agronomists and livestock production experts will be among the Great Lakes Grazing Conference speakers Feb. 19-20 at the Stouffer Renaissance Hotel in Battle Creek, Mich. One speaker is Ron St. John, who grazes a 1,400-cow Holstein herd year-round in northern Florida. St. John told Hoard's Dairyman magazine that he expects a 20 to 30 percent return on investment of \$1,900 per cow, not including land, and expects to produce milk for \$4 per hundredweight (cwt.) in winter and \$6 per cwt. in summer.

"If I worried about herd average, I'd be adding costs to producing milk, thus reducing my profitability," St. John said in the Hoard's article. "It's not unreasonable to net \$800 per cow annually with a low-input, below-average-production dairy grazed year round." For more information, contact Ben Bartlett, Michigan State University extension livestock specialist at (906) 439-5880; or Bill Bivens, MSU extension agriculture agent at (517) 788-4292.

## **Holistic Resource Management workshops in February**

There will be two programs on "Holistic Resource Management (HRM)--Farming for Profit, Land and Family," in February. They're Feb. 5-7 at Ghent, and Feb. 20-22 in Plainview. HRM is an innovative and practical new strategy for creating profit while enhancing human values and improving the environment. For more information, contact the Land Stewardship Project, 103 W. Nichols Av., Montevideo, MN 56265, (612) 269-2105.

## **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](mailto: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.

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