

Sustainable Agriculture

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Extension Service announces 12 new programs

The University of Minnesota Extension Service has funded 12 new programs as part of an initiative called “Sustaining Minnesota’s natural resource based industries.” The programs, which include 16 new field staff positions throughout Minnesota, are funded with \$692,000 annually from the Minnesota Legislature.

Katherine Fennelly, dean of the University of Minnesota Extension Service, says the new funds are being used to strengthen university-community partnerships in support of agriculture and the environment.

The new educational programs cover a range of needs. Examples include alternative crops systems, tourism, private forest lands, and shoreland vegetation in northern Minnesota; agricultural drainage and swine business management in southern Minnesota.

Improved water quality is an objective of several programs, including an environmental stewardship program for farmers in central and southern Minnesota and a statewide program on individual sewage treatment systems.

In the Twin Cities-St. Cloud rural-urban fringe area, a new program will help develop land use planning in an area with many livestock farms and an ever-increasing urban environment.

Some extension educators will work out of Staples, Cloquet and southeastern Minnesota as part of the “Regional Partnerships” program—a new way for citizens and the University to work together to develop programs that sustain Minnesota’s natural resource and agricultural industries.

Two other new programs are designed for new immigrants. One, in southwestern Minnesota, will enhance a “Connecting Communities” program where bilingual individuals work with new immigrants of Hispanic, Southeast Asian, and East African heritage. In the Rosemount area, new immigrants who wish to farm and make the transition from welfare to work will receive technical, business management, and marketing help.

“Sustaining Minnesota’s natural resource based industries” is a joint effort of the University’s College of Agricultural, Food, and Environmental Sciences, the College of Natural Resources, and the Extension Service. For more information, contact Aimee Viniard-Weideman at (612) 625-1759, e-mail: aviniard-weideman@extension.umn.edu. National commission on small farms says it’s “Time to Act”

National commission on small farms says it’s “Time to Act”

A Time to Act is the title of the report of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Commission on Small Farms. Just published in January 1998, the report makes 146 recommendations to correct biases against small farms in public policy and markets. Small farms were generally defined as

farms with sales less than \$250,000 operated by families that own the production or own or lease the productive assets. Here are highlights from the commission recommendations.

--Cultivation and strength of small farms. USDA should design and implement a small farm research initiative aimed at developing the knowledge technologies and production systems to help small-scale farmers reduce the need for capital and purchased inputs, and thereby capture a larger share of the food dollar. USDA should also recommit itself as the “lender of last resort” by focusing greater attention on serving the credit needs of small, minority, and beginning farmers and reversing the shift to guaranteed loans.

--Fair, competitive, and open markets for small farms. The Secretary of Agriculture should seek legislation clarifying the authority of the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) to prohibit discriminatory pricing by meat packers. And until such legislation is passed, GIPSA should vigorously argue against discriminatory pricing in the courts.

--Establish future generations of small farmers. USDA should launch an interagency Beginning Farmer Initiative to develop farm management models emphasizing low-capital investment, optimal use of skilled labor and management, and high-value crop and livestock production and marketing methods.

--Other recommendations included emphasizing sustainable agriculture as a profitable and ecologically and socially sound strategy for small farms, and increasing the budget for the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program by \$10 million each year over three years to reach \$40 million.

Small farms have public value, the commission said. Although the dominant belief in agriculture is that large farms are more efficient than small farms, the commission cited research by economist Willis Peterson, University of Minnesota. Peterson found factors other than size influence the unit costs in agriculture. He says “small family and part-time farms are at least as efficient as larger commercial operations. In fact, there is evidence of diseconomies of scale as farm size increases.”

The commission’s report said our economic accounting systems don’t take into account the “hidden” costs of large farms—such as loss of market competition and environmental consequences of concentrating many animals in small areas.

Small farms contribute more than farm production to our society—they embody a diversity of ownership, cropping systems, landscapes, biological organization, culture, and traditions. Since the majority of farmland is managed by a large number of small farm operators, the responsible management of soil, water, and wildlife produces environmental benefits.

Decentralized land ownership produces more equitable economic opportunity for rural people and offers self-employment and business management opportunities. Farms, particularly family farms, can be nurturing places for children to grow up and acquire the values of responsibility and hard work.

You can access the report on [USDA’s home page](#). To get a printed copy, call (202) 720-0122 or send an e-mail message to smallfarm@usda.gov.

Hog manure boosts corn yield more than fertilizer in U of M study

Hog manure boosted corn yield more than commercial nitrogen fertilizer in a series of field studies conducted by a University of Minnesota soil scientist.

“Although hog manure may not shine like the gold in jewelry, it definitely has a strong economic value,” says Gyles Randall of the U of M Southern Experiment Station at Waseca. “It should not be treated as gunk.”

Randall says some hog operations produce more manure than their available land base can environmentally accept. As a result, producers sometimes work out an arrangement to apply manure to their neighbors’ land. However, the neighbors often question the value of the manure compared with fertilizer nitrogen, and may be dubious about accepting manure. The need to transport manure can also raise questions about its value.

Randall conducted seven field studies in five southern Minnesota counties over the past 11 years in which he compared hog manure to fertilizer nitrogen. At each site, finishing hog slurry manure from under-barn pits was applied in the spring and incorporated immediately. There was also fall application at two sites.

Manure application rates were 3000 gallons to 4000 gallons per acre at six of the sites and 6050 gallons per acre at the other site. For the comparison, fertilizer nitrogen was applied at all sites at rates considered to be optimum and non-limiting for corn. Soil test levels for potassium and phosphorus were high to very high at all site.

“Corn yields were greater for slurry hog manure than for commercial fertilizer at six of the seven sites,” says Randall. “At these six sites, corn yielded 10.7 bushels per acre more with spring-applied manure than with the non-limiting nitrogen fertilizer rate. In the two studies where manure was applied in both the fall and spring, yields were increased 7.5 bushels per acre with the fall application and 15 bushels per acre with the spring application.”

Randall says the study results clearly show a yield-enhancing effect from hog manure compared with fertilizer nitrogen. “A yield response of this magnitude is definitely a good reason to use management practices that efficiently utilize manure rather than just disposing of it,” he concludes. Randall can be reached at (507) 835-3620.

Nutrient education through nutrient balances

Two years ago, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) initiated a “Nutrient Management Yardstick” project in the Midwest. The yardstick, developed in the Netherlands, is an on-farm nutrient balance program that takes only about an hour to complete.

The purpose of the tool is to aid farmers in understanding nutrient flows on their farm. Farmers estimate nutrient loads entering the farm (through feed, fertilizers, purchased livestock, nitrogen fixation) and leaving the farm (through sold livestock, milk, crops, manure).

If more nutrients enter than leave the farm, a surplus is created. A well-managed farm without any extenuating circumstances tends to have slight surpluses, which implies that crop needs were met but fertilizer use was not exceptional. Excessive surpluses indicate that water quality may be adversely affected by farm runoff.

Under the direction of the Blue Earth River Basin Initiative, several farmers in the Blue Earth River Basin have been participating in the program. Several of the farmers had slight nutrient deficits. A number of factors could have caused this, including changes in silage, herd size or crop yields. All farmers participating in the program had nutrient surpluses considerably below the typical surpluses found on farms in the Netherlands.

As farmers participate in the program over several years and learn more about nutrient flows on their farm, a trend towards diminishing surpluses is expected. Two farms in Brown County, Wisconsin have experienced a reduced nutrient surplus. Kevin Erb, nutrient and pest management specialist for the Brown County Extension Service, estimates that the two farms saved an average of \$376 per farm in fertilizer costs after two years of yardstick participation. He attributes the savings to increased awareness of the benefits of crediting manure.

For more information about the yardstick program, contact Mark Muller, IATP, at (612) 870-3420, e-mail mmuller@iatp.org.

Comment period for organic standards extended to April 30

The comment period for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's proposed regulation establishing national organic standards has been extended until April 30, 1998. Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman said, "The goal is to develop a final rule that the organic community and all the public can embrace."

Comments on the proposed standards may be directed to USDA until April 30. For more information, you can contact Marc Schwartz at the Organic Growers and Buyers Association office, (612) 572-1967, fax (612) 572-2527, e-mail ogba@sprynet.com.

The proposal is on the web. Or, you can purchase a copy of the proposed rules for \$8 from the Federal Register by calling (202) 512-1800. Comments may be sent to the web site or sent by fax to (202) 690-4632. They may also be mailed to Eileen S. Stommes, Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA, Room 4007-S, Ag Stop 0275, P.O. Box 96456, Washington, D.C., 20090-6456.

Calendar of events

March 8-10--"Sustainable Agriculture, Meet the Press," a workshop on developing media skills and strategy, Alexandria. Contact Kat Griffith (608) 265-3020, e-mail kbgriffi@facstaff.wisc.edu.

March 11-12--"Profitable Farming," a seminar on organizing and managing a successful farm operation, Freeport Community Center. Douglas Gunnink (507) 237-5162.

March 14, 28--"Farming the Sandy Soils in our Community: Neighbors Working Together to Protect Water Resources," Holiday Inn, St. Cloud, (March 14). Contact Sherburne County Extension Office, 1-800-433-5236, e-mail cmossberg@extension.umn.edu. Identical program March 28 in Wadena. Contact the Wadena County Extension Office (218) 631-7623, e-mail: thovde@extension.umn.edu.

March 19--"Keeping Open Spaces for Tomorrow," preserving ag lands and other open spaces, Prior Lake Fire Station, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Contact the Land Stewardship Project (612) 653-0618.

March 21--Minnesota Organic Conference, St. Mary's Catholic Church, Arlington. Contact Douglas Gunnink (507) 237-5162.

April 1,2--"Making the Transition to Grazing," Carpenter Farm, Caledonia (April 1), 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Contact the Houston County Extension Office (507) 724-5807. April 2, also 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., French Farm, West Concord. Contact the Dodge County Extension Office (507) 374-6435

About this newsletter...

For the past year we've been funded by the Minnesota Extension Service and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) with support from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

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.