

Sustainable Agriculture

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Sustainable hog production in old farm buildings goes high tech

Putting some hogs in an old barn or machine shed may not sound high tech, but developing the technology to make it work could help family hog farms survive and prosper. “The Midwest is filled with farmsteads that are devoid of livestock, but have many structurally sound buildings on them,” says Dave Serfling, a Preston, Minn., farmer.

“Our local Sustainable Farming Association has decided to promote technology instead of products,” he says. “Hoop houses are being heavily promoted as sustainable hog production technology. But I believe hoop houses are a product. The technology used in hoop houses is deep bedding and naturally ventilation.”

He’s received a 1998 producer grant through the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. The grant will help fund the remodeling of an old two-story hip-roof barn to become a deep-bedded, naturally ventilated, wean-to finish facility. “This facility will complement another old barn that I use in the winter for farrowing,” Serfling says. “The old barn utilizes zone heating, bedding, crates, and free stall techniques.”

Developing wean-to-finish techniques for sustainable hog production is an objective of the study. “One of the major hurdles for a wean-to-finish barn is having a feeder that works well for pigs ranging from 20 to 250 pounds,” Serfling says. To do this, he wants to build a fence-line feeder that will also serve as storage for five tons of feed. This will eliminate storage bins and augers.

Serfling is researching using straw for insulation in the ceiling. The natural ventilation system may use technologies such as double insulated curtains and chimney ventilation to the second floor.

“Hog production is changing very fast,” Serfling wrote in his project proposal. “Industrial confinement production is widespread. Many independent family farmers, including myself, wonder where they will fit as hog producers in the future. Family hog farmers need technology that gives them an advantage. There are many economies of scale that the smaller producers can’t utilize. We need techniques that give us economies of small size.

“The wean-to-finish technique is an example of a hot topic in the hog industry. Adopters are finding increased performance and decreased labor. The major negative is the inefficient use of high-priced buildings for part of the hog’s life. Sustainable hog producers have the ability to remove this negative by using cheaper housing options.”

Dave Serfling can be contacted at Rt. 2, Box 176, Preston, MN 55965, (507) 765-2797, e-mail: dianeserf@aol.com

Extension Service starting new programs throughout state

The University of Minnesota Extension Service has filled 7 of 16 new positions as part of the “Sustaining Minnesota’s natural resource-based industries” initiative. The initiative comes from \$692,000 of annual funding from the Minnesota Legislature. It includes 12 new programs and 16 new field staff positions.

The new funds are being used to strengthen university-county partnerships in support of agriculture and the environment, says Katherine Fennelly, dean and director of the University of Minnesota Extension Service. “People have been hired for seven positions, and the other nine positions are in the process of being filled,” she says. “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.

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.

Other new programs include alternative crops, tourism, private forest lands, and shoreland vegetation in northern Minnesota; and agricultural drainage and swine business management in southern Minnesota.

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.

Extension educators will work out of Staples, Cloquet, and Rochester 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 of the new programs are designed for new immigrants. 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. Southwestern Minnesota will enhance its “Connecting Communities” program, where bilingual people work with new immigrants of Hispanic, Southeast Asian, and East African heritage.

The new Extension educators hired thus far include:

Zachary (Zach) Fore , Cropping Systems, Red Lake Falls. Fore will work with crop commodity groups to help develop alternative cropping systems. Previously he worked as an agronomist for Cenex/Land O’ Lakes.

Nigatu Tadesse, New Immigrant Farmer Program, Rosemount. Tadesse, an agronomist, will work with new immigrants who wish to farm and make the transition from welfare to work.

Lee Raeth, Central Regional Partnership Program, Staples. The program will address community-identified issues on an ongoing, long-term basis (see next story). Raeth had been an Extension educator in Buffalo, Minn., and has 23 years of experience with the Extension Service.

Lowell Busman, Water Resource Management, Waseca. Busman previously worked in other water quality programs with the Extension Service before starting in the new position.

Kenneth Olson, Individual Sewage Treatment Systems, Sherburne County. Homeowners and small communities operate over half a million individual sewage systems in Minnesota, but almost half don't treat the sewage properly. Olson, currently the Extension educator in Sherburne County, begins Nov. 16.

Jodi DeJong, Environmental Stewardship Program, Morris, starts Nov. 16, 1998. Responsibilities include helping reduce the environmental impacts of agricultural production while maintaining or improving income to participating farmers. DeJong is an Extension educator in crops system in Traverse County.

Veronica Long, Extension Educator-Tourism, Grand Rapids. Long, who is an assistant professor in Recreation and Tourism at Virginia Commonwealth University, will begin Jan. 13, 1999. Responsibilities include existing Extension tourism programs such as "At Your Service" and "Business Retention and Expansion," and working with the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe to help develop an Indian Tourism Association.

For more information about the new programs and positions, contact Jeanne Markell at (612) 624-5360, jmarkell@extension.umn.edu.

Partnership between Minnesota citizens and the U of M becomes reality

The dream of creating a partnership between Minnesota citizens and the University of Minnesota is close to becoming reality. Three pilot regions in the state have been formed in the newly created Regional Agricultural and Natural Resources Sustainable Development Partnership funded by the Minnesota Legislature to address issues related to agriculture, natural resources, and tourism.

Regions are the Northeast, where the office will be in Cloquet; the Southeast (Rochester); and the Central Region, where Lee Raeth will have his office in Staples (see story above). Staff positions for the Northeast and Southeast regions are in the process of being filled.

Principles of the partnership include:

—Developing a richer, more vibrant partnership with the citizens of Minnesota and their land grant university.

—Addressing agriculture and natural resource issues in a manner consistent with sustainable development principles.

—Working in an active citizenship participation mode.

The partnership task force of 12 citizens and faculty representatives has developed guidelines and operating principles. For more information, contact Pat Henderson at the MISA office, (612) 625-8235, 1-800-909-6472, patsway@aol.com

Warren Sifferath working on small-scale agriculture ideas for COAFES

Warren Sifferath, who recently retired as Dakota County Extension educator, is working on a part-time basis to help develop ideas for small-scale agriculture programs for the College of Agricultural, Food, and Environmental Sciences (COAFES). Sifferath co-chaired the Small Farm Task Force of COAFES, which recommended doing more to help farmers who are "seeking alternatives to getting bigger or getting out."

Sifferath says he's looking for ideas to do a better job of "packaging" existing ideas and programs for small farmers. "We'd like to take things that are going on now and focus them for small-scale agriculture," he says. He's located at the University's Rosemount Research Center. Part of his responsibilities include working with the program coordinator for new immigrant farmers, designed to help immigrant families who wish to leave welfare for farming occupations. Contact Sifferath with your ideas at (651) 322-7103, fax (651) 322-6168.

Calendar of 1998 events . . .

Thursday, Nov. 12, Salem Lutheran Church, Hermantown, MN. "Food supply, as if people mattered," a workshop featuring Dr. Bill Heffernan, University of Missouri rural sociologist; and Dr. Dean Freudenberger, retired from Luther Seminary, St. Paul. Heffernan is an expert on concentration in the meat packing industry and will discuss who controls the food system. Freudenberger will speak on the ethics of food production. His books include *No food for tomorrow and Global dust bowl*. Contact Jenifer Buckley at (218) 727-1414.

Saturday, Dec. 5, Noblesville, IN. Midwest small conference and trade show for farmers and consumers. Presenters include several farmers/authors. Contact Sustainable Earth, 100 Georton Ct., W. Lafayette, IN 47906, (765) 463-9366, e-mail sbonney@iquest.net.

Tuesday, Feb. 9 & Wednesday, Feb. 10, 1999. Adding Value on the Farm: Value Added and Marketing Conference, Holiday Inn, Eau Claire, WI. Contact Larry Swain (715) 425-3083, swain@wisplan.uwex.edu.

Tuesday, Feb. 16 & Wednesday, Feb. 17, 1999, Kelly Inn, St. Cloud, MN. Minnesota Organic Conference, designed for a wide audience: certified producers, those considering certification, and people wanting to learn how to become better managers and reduce off-farm inputs, regardless of whether they go into organic production. Includes a trade show. Contact Jan Gunnink, (507) 237-5162.

Friday, Feb. 19 & Saturday, Feb. 20, 1999. 2nd Annual Minnesota Grazing Conference, Victoria Inn, Hutchinson, MN. Contact Jan Gunnink, (507) 237-5162.

Friday, March 5 & Saturday, March 6, 1999 10th Annual Upper Midwest Organic Conference, Sinsinawa Mound, WI. Contact Faye Jones, (715) 772-6819, e-mail fjeoc@win.bright.net .

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.