

Sustainable Agriculture

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Those \$22 organic soybeans look good, but take extra homework

It looks easy—take that old CRP land, contract for \$22 organic soybeans and enjoy the trip to the bank. But growing and marketing any organically certified crop takes hours of planning, careful selection of non-chemical inputs and meticulous records. There are plenty of ways—such as applying products promoted as "natural" but not approved for organic certification—that can jeopardize that \$22 bean contract.

Organic certification applies to the system, not the specific crop or product, says Lisa Gulbranson of Organic Services and Management International. And since crop rotations are required, you need to look beyond the next crop year if you're interested in moving to organic production.

"Contact the certifying agency to be sure that any products you use are approved," she emphasizes. "Many products are marketed as natural or organic, but aren't. And the stakes are huge—you can easily forfeit an \$80,000 contract."

Gulbranson, who wrote the Extension Service bulletin "*Organic Certification of Crop Production in Minnesota*," recently spoke to crop systems educators with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. Minnesota farmers helped write the new 40-page publication, which was co-published by the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA). It discusses the decision of whether to become a certified organic producer leads you through the certification process and has sample forms to use on farms.

The publication, number BU-7202-S, is available for \$3 plus sales tax from the Extension Service Distribution Center. Call (800) 876-8636, or (612) 624-4900 in the Twin Cities.

Going certified organic was at first a good business decision...

At first the decision to switch the 2,000 acre grain and sugarbeet operation to certified organic production was strictly business—it was more profitable. But over time, it became more than that, says Lynn Brakke, who farms near Moorhead in Minnesota's Red River Valley.

"Many of my neighbors say farming is just not fun anymore," says Brakke. "Organic production has been more challenging, but also more rewarding. And my employees say that too," says Brakke, who sells most of his organic production to overseas markets.

Social ramifications with friends and neighbors were huge when he started experimenting with organic production. "It was not socially acceptable and I hid it for awhile. But now I'm coming out of the 'organic closet,'" he jokes.

Developing and keeping markets is the hardest part of his certified organic operation. Brakke says the price premium for organic food products is about 2.5:1, "but you earn it. Quality is everything. There's a myth that organic products are of lower quality, but quite the opposite is true. Organic products must be of food quality."

He tries to have all of his crops sold before they're planted, and advises marketing only through a reputable firm. "Some (marketing firms) are not, and some people have been burned," he adds.

One constant challenge is the thin volume. For example, Brakke says, you can develop a market for organic potatoes or sugarbeets. "But next year one large farm can come in and there goes your market. As organic markets develop, they should become more stable."

Personal relationships are the key to successful marketing, Brakke says. Many of his products go to Japan, where "honor and personal integrity are valued. In a Japanese supermarket, next to the small packages of tofu you'll find a picture of the producer. So you're selling integrity, not just a product."

Strangely enough, **finding good sources of manure** is one of his biggest production challenges. "Lots of people have a problem getting rid of manure, but I have to 'freight in' manure from Nebraska and Milwaukee, Wis. Right now there's a terrific distribution problem, although that's changing. We have a local poultry producer who's starting to compost the manure."

Brakke recently spoke at a crops training session for educators with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. He can be reached at (218) 585-4106, fax (218) 585-4246.

Rural Options programs funded by U of M Extension Service

New programs to help Minnesota farm families cope with hard financial times have been funded through the Rural Options program of the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

They include \$88,000 for short-term educational assistance to farm families in Northwestern Minnesota; \$40,200 to train educators to help farm families with risk management, stress management and financial planning; and \$7,000 to write legal fact sheets.

Northwestern Minnesota is most severely affected by the poor farm economy. Of the 5,000 farmers in the seven counties of Northwestern Minnesota, about half have more than 50 percent debt in their farming operations. Farm lenders say this means serious financial restructuring, or in many cases, total liquidation.

A seminar series on tax, legal and estate planning will be held at four Red River Valley locations. It will emphasize "just-in-time" information to help farmers who are restructuring or leaving their farming operations. Early planning often means substantial savings to farm families, says Howard Person, Pennington County extension educator. It can also help farm families develop other careers. Other funding will help organize agricultural marketing clubs, start a crops diagnostics team and fund career exploration programs.

In addition to Northwestern Minnesota, many farm families throughout Minnesota are adversely affected by low returns for their crops and livestock. To help Extension educators work with them, a three-day staff training session is scheduled January 13-15, 1999 in Alexandria. Topics include developing a practical risk management plan, legal issues, tax planning, managing change and stress, and career exploration.

Statewide, the current crisis is less visible than it was in the last prolonged farm crisis in the 1980s. Bill Wilcke, engineer with the Extension Service, thinks one reason may be that this one is largely related to crops, especially in Northwestern Minnesota. Losing crop farmers is as serious as losing livestock farmers, he says, but it may be less visible.

When livestock disappear from a farm, or another farm builds a large livestock facility, many people notice. But it's less visible when a crops farm goes out of business and the neighboring farm gets larger.

Extension educators throughout Minnesota are available for assistance. Just call any county office of the University of Minnesota Extension Service. In Northwestern Minnesota, you can call 1-800-543-7709, or (218) 281-3820 and speak with a FarmWrap worker.

Educators can apply for SARE grants to teach sustainable agriculture

Tight markets, low prices and bad weather force many farmers to look at alternative ways to grow and sell their products. To help provide Extension Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service and other professionals with training to help farm families, the North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program is calling for competitive grant proposals from experienced educators.

Nearly \$500,000 is available for one- to two-year grants. Individual grants have ranged from \$10,000 to \$80,000. Priorities for 1999 are marketing and value-added processing, farming and ranching systems-level education, economics of sustainable agriculture, sustainable weed and pest management, measuring soil quality and health, and emerging issues.

Proposals are due Feb. 12, 1999. Contact the SARE office at the University of Nebraska, (402) 472-7081, fax (402) 472-0280, or e-mail: sare001@unlvm.unl.edu, or [web site](#).

Calendar of 1998-99 events

Thursday, Dec. 10, 9:30 a.m., Organic Producers Workshop, Community Center, Twin Valley. Contact Ken Pazdernik (218) 784-7183.

Friday, Dec. 11, 9 a.m., Organic Farming, Roseau City Auditorium, Curt Nyegaard (218) 463-1052.

Thursday-Saturday, Dec. 10-12 Acres USA Eco-Farming Conference, "Tools of the Trade," Radisson Hotel South, Minneapolis. Call (800) 355-5313 for more information

Thursday, Dec. 17, 7 p.m., Converting to Organic Production (first in a series of four workshops), Southwest Experiment Station, Lamberton (507) 794-2382.

Saturday, Jan. 9, Western SFA Annual Meeting (Marketing), Congregational Church, Montevideo, (320) 847-3432.

Thursday, Jan. 12, first in a series of three Whole Farm Planning workshops, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m., Frontenac, (between Red Wing and Lake City). Other dates are Feb. 2 and 23. Contact Beth Knudsen, DNR, (651) 345-5601 for more information.

Saturday, Jan. 16, Princeton SFA Winter Workshop, Earthway Farms, South Haven, (612) 389-4920.

Tuesday, Jan. 19, first of three workshops featuring Joel Salatin, an innovator in direct marketing and author of "Salad Bar Beef" and "You Can Farm." To be held in the Montevideo area in the evening. Contact Audrey Arner or Terry VanDerPol at the Western LSP office, (320) 269-2105.

Wednesday, Jan. 20 Joel Salatin (see above), 1 p.m.-9 p.m. Location TBA, but in the Shakopee area. Contact Caroline van Schaik at LSP's White Bear Lake office, (651) 653-0618.

Thursday, Jan. 21, Joel Salatin (see above), Location TBA, but in the Rochester area. Contact Richard Ness at the Lewiston LSP office (507) 523-3366.

Friday, Jan. 22-Sunday, Jan. 24, Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, Madison, Wis. Call Dave Butcher (218) 568-8624.

Saturday, Jan. 23, Northeast SFA Annual Meeting (Biosolids or Sludge?), Cloquet Forestry Center, Jenifer Buckley 218) 727-1414, sfa@skypoint.com.

Saturday, Jan. 30, Central SFA Annual Meeting (Harvest the Sun), Browerville Community Center, DeEtta Bilek (218) 445-5475.

Saturday, Jan. 30, Hiawatha Valley Annual Meeting (Profitability Through Diversity), Sawyer's Inn, Goodhue.

Thursday, Feb. 4-Friday, Feb. 5, Minnesota Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference, St. Cloud (651) 436-3930.

Tuesday, Feb. 9-Wednesday, Feb. 10, Adding Value on the Farm: Value Added and Marketing Conference, Holiday Inn, Eau Claire, WI. Contact Larry Swain (7615) 425-3083, swain@wisplan.uwex.edu.

Wednesday, Feb. 10-Thursday, Feb. 11, 24th Annual Minnesota Forage Conference, Kahler Hotel, Rochester (651) 436-3930.

Tuesday, Feb. 16-Wednesday, Feb. 17, Kelly Inn, St. Cloud, 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, 2nd Annual Minnesota Grazing Conference, Victoria Inn, Hutchinson. Contact Jan Gunnink, (507) 237-5162.

Thursday, March 4, Marketing Options for Small to Medium Size Meat Producers, Mankato, Kevin Edberg (651) 296-6382.

Friday, March 5-Saturday, March 6, 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.