

Sustainable Agriculture

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New markets from alternative swine systems offer hope for farmers

It was ironic, Jim Van Der Pol says. Just as hog prices bottomed out in the fall of 1998 and farmers were giving up hog production, markets were beginning to develop for special kinds of pork.

“I knew of an Iowa company looking for hogs raised drug-free on grass and straw. That company is still running behind its needs and is looking for producers. And export markets for Berkshire hog meat to the Asian market were (and are still) growing. Both of the markets pay a very nice premium,” says Van Der Pol, a farmer from Kerkhoven, Minn., who recently finished a one-year term as the School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems at the University of Minnesota.

Van Der Pol has 20 years of experience in alternative swine production practices, including pasturing and low-cost housing. In the endowed chair position, he worked directly with the University’s Alternative Swine Production Systems Program and split his time between the University’s West Central Research and Outreach Center in Morris and the St. Paul campus.

At Morris, he worked with animal scientist Lee Johnston in moving 10 surplus sows out of conventional housing into a hoop shelter. “This style of production is vital for any producer who aims at the specialty pork markets,” he says. “The piglets are weaned at a later time, and are often grown for market right where they were born, in contrast to conventional systems.

“The piglets did well and produced numbers just a little short of their confinement mates. This little experiment made quite an impression in University circles,” Van Der Pol says. “And the idea came from Lee Johnston, whose background is nutrition in conventional systems.” Four new hoop houses at Morris will be monitored for water runoff and percolation, and researchers will use the hoops for ongoing manure pack work. Plans are also underway to convert a gestation building at Morris to a Swedish deep-straw farrowing system for research and demonstration. Hog pastures are also being established.

He talked with other U of M researchers about running feeding trials in hoops and including straw-based systems in University Extension programs.

“These practices are important to farm communities in Minnesota,” Van Der Pol says. “Some of the new opportunities in hog production call for hogs produced in alternative systems. The work of the Alternative Swine Task Force and my position in the Endowed Chair was to position the University so it can serve this need.”

A complete copy of Van Der Pol’s report is available from MISA at 1-800-909-MISA (6472), or misamail@umn.edu.

U of M researchers developing native legumes for Minnesota landscapes

University of Minnesota researchers are developing two indigenous legumes into viable crops for Minnesota farmers. The legumes are false indigo and Illinois bundleflower.

False indigo is a shrub that grows to a maximum height of 10 feet. It produces abundant leaves that could serve as high quality forage, stems that could be used for biomass energy, and high-oil seeds of unknown potential.

Illinois bundleflower is an herbaceous perennial. It produces abundant foliage that can be used as forage. It also yields large amounts of high-protein seed.

“The agricultural landscape of Minnesota is dominated by a few species of annual plants,” says Lee DeHaan, one of the U of M agronomists working on the project. “This structure has produced an unsustainable food system and has reduced animal and human health.

“Agriculture that enhances the health of landscapes, animals and humans must be based upon a different set of plants than corn, soybeans and wheat,” DeHaan says. “Indigenous legumes could build the foundation for a new agriculture and are a logical choice for agricultural landscapes.”

- They’re adapted to the local climate and soils so the need for breeding will be reduced.
- Many of them are perennial, and the dominant plants of Minnesota’s native ecosystems were perennial. “If we desire to create agro ecosystems with the sustainability and resilience similar to that found in the state’s natural systems, we will need to return perennial plants to the landscape,” DeHaan says.
- Most of them are capable of symbiotic nitrogen fixation. By utilizing atmospheric nitrogen, these plants are able to dramatically reduce the requirement for inorganic nitrogen fertilization.

Contact DeHaan at 612-625-8170, e-mail dehaa003@umn.edu. NCR SARE funds the project.

North Central SARE calls for innovative agricultural grant proposals

The USDA’s North Central Region (NCR) Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program is calling for collaborative teams of researchers, educators, farmers and others to apply for competitive grants. Projects should study or educate others about environmentally benign agricultural systems that are profitable and supportive of local communities.

About \$1.3 million will be available in 2001 to fund creative projects addressing long-term enhancement of food and fiber systems in the 12-state region. Applications are available starting July 14 by contacting NCR SARE at 402-472-7081, or ncrsare@unl.edu. The call for preproposals can also be found at www.sare.org/ncrsarestarting July 14. Preproposals are due Sept. 8, 2000.

North Central SARE maintains marketing listserv

You are invited to participate in a dynamic discussion about alternative marketing through North Central SARE’s “altmarketing” listserv. As a follow-up to the North Central SARE November 1999 regional marketing conference, a listserv was created to continue discussions regarding value-added and direct farm marketing. Farmers, farm educators, food business leaders and others are welcome.

The address of the list is altmarketing@crcvms.unl.edu. To subscribe, send a message to listserv@crcvms.unl.edu that says: SUBSCRIBE altmarketing Firstname Lastname. Find more marketing information at www.sare.org/san/ncrsare/marketing.htm. For more information, contact Lisa Bauer at 402-472-0265, lbauer2@unl.edu.

Minnesota Haylist is back up and running

The Minnesota Haylist is back up and running. The easy-to-remember website URL is www.haylist.umn.edu.

The Haylist is coordinated by the University of Minnesota Extension Service and is available for free use by anyone in the US and Canada. The best new features for the Haylist include the ability to search by multiple hay, bale types or states all at once, and/or by distance from any zip code. You may be interested in using the “comments” area on the haylist to buy or sell organic or other special types of hay. Check with a county office of the Extension Service if you don’t have access to the Internet.

Fact sheets available on Sustainable Farming Systems Project

The Farming Systems Project is a joint project of the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA), Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota (SFA), Land Stewardship Project (LSP), and The Minnesota Project that was funded by the LCMR beginning in 1997. The project involves researching farm sustainability as reflected by farm economics, environmental impact and the quality of home and community life.

These fact sheets offer information about various aspects of the project:

- Sustainable Farming Systems Project Overview
- Description of The Chippewa River Whole Farm Planning and Monitoring Team Description of The Sand Creek Watershed Team
- Preliminary Research Results of On-farm Water Quality Monitoring
- Composting: A Cost Effective Manure Management Alternative
- Description, Work of the Economics Task Force
- More Than Just Numbers, Monitoring Whole Farm Goals with Traditional Financial Data

The fact sheets are available from the state SFA, LSP, The Minnesota Project or MISA: 411 Borlaug Hall, 1991 Buford Circle, Saint Paul, MN 55108-1013, 1- 800-909-MISA (6472), or misamail@umn.edu

New book on building healthy soil to improve yields, profits

A new book, Building Soils for Better Crops, is available from USDA’s Sustainable Agriculture Network. The book’s hands-on approach makes it a natural for farmers and ranchers who may see results just a season or two after changing their practices. The book also will appeal to gardeners, students and agricultural educators who work with producers.

Single copies sell for \$19.95. Bulk discounts are available for 10 or more. Call 802- 656-0484, e-mail nesare@zoo.uvm.edu.

Calendar of events, 2000

These events are sponsored by numerous organizations. More information is available on MISA's website: www.misa.umn.edu

July 13 **Land Application of Mortality Compost to Improve Soil and Water Quality. Field Day.** Neil Hansen, West Central Research and Outreach Center, State Highway 329, Morris, MN 56267. Time: 7:00 registration, 7:30 wagon leaves farm shop at WCROC.

July 20 **Reducing Chemical Usage by Using Soy Oil on Corn and Soybeans.** Field Day. Donald Wheeler, 1875 - 140th Street, Balaton, MN 56115. Time: 10:00 a.m. - noon. Call: 607-734-5433.

July 20 **Land Stewardship Opportunities for Women.** South Central Technical College, North Mankato, MN. Time, 8:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. \$10 (includes lunch). Register by calling 507-235-3341.

July 25-26 **Minnesota Rural Summit.** Rochester, MN. \$160. For details see www.minnesotaruralpartners.org or call 507-637-2010.

July 26 **Gathering for Women in the Environmental Field.** Fort Snelling State Park, St. Paul, MN. Time, 5:30 - 8:00 pm. \$15 (\$10 members, \$8 students) includes light dinner. For details and registration by July 23 call Elizabeth at 651-453-0435.

July 27 **Bio-Based Weed Control in Strawberry Using Sheep Wool Mulch, Canola Mulch and Canola Green Manure.** Field Day. Emily Hoover, West Central Research and Outreach Center. Time: 5:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m. Call: 320-589-1711.

July 29 **Closer to Home Fair.** Plainview, MN. Time, 9:00am - 5:00pm. For details contact Peggy Thomas at 507-767-3202.

July 29 **Three Projects Combined into one Field Day,** 10 a.m. – 3 p.m.

1. **Living Snow Fences for Improved Pasture Production.** Mike and Mary Hansen farm, Route 2, Box 173, Hendricks, MN 56136. Call 507-694-1825.
2. **Increased Forage Production Through Control of Water Runoff.** Karen Sovell Farm, Route 1, Box 133, Ivanhoe, MN 56142. Free lunch at Mary Sovell's farm at noon. Call: 507-694-1486.
3. **Using Black Medic (*Medicago lupulina*) as a Protein Source in Grazing Corn,** Joseph Rolling farm. Call: 507-487-5742.

Aug. 2, **Blueberry Field Night.** Central Lakes Ag. Center, Staples, MN. Time: 5:30 p.m. – 9 p.m. Registration is \$3. Call 218-894-5196.

August 12 **Local, Sustainable Food. Mike & Jennifer Rupprecht farm,** Lewiston, MN. For details contact the Land Stewardship Project at 507-523-3366.

Aug. 5 **Agroforestry Field Tour, Alexandria,** 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. The cost is \$12.50 by Aug. 1 and \$15 thereafter (includes box lunch). Mike Demchik, 218-894-5167 or ormdemchik@forestry.umn.edu

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.