

Sustainable Agriculture

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Producing organic pork not a question of right or wrong methods

Producing natural and organic pork is not a question of right or wrong in terms of different methods. It's simply a matter of meeting consumer demand, says W. Parker Wheatley, a University of Minnesota applied economist.

"If some consumers desire pasture-raised pork because they believe that pigs are 'happier' living in the fields, there's room for smaller niche producers to meet and profit from that demand," says Wheatley, who recently completed a study for the U of M Swine Center.

"The production of such niche products must be driven by what consumers want and will pay for," Wheatley says. "This leaves room in the market for an array of different niche producers, such as natural and organic pork producers, as well as traditional producers."

"Natural and organic production may be viable alternatives to more capital-intensive production for many small-scale producers," he says. Wheatley recently completed the study by reviewing a number of previous studies done throughout the U.S. and by contacting pork producers and processors.

"The evidence suggests a good niche market for small and independent producers, but it would be worthwhile to conduct more primary research," Wheatley says. "Much of the evidence we have regarding retail premiums was based on survey research."

"While surveys provide some insights into the willingness of consumers to buy natural pork products, this research does not provide actual incentives and could provide biased results. More reliable information could be obtained through actual market data obtained from retailers and wholesalers."

However, consumer concerns about food safety, animal welfare and environmental management likely mean continued demand for these niche products. Wheatley says, "Our evidence suggests strong growth in consumer demand for natural pork products will support premiums for natural pork products over conventional pork products."

For the smaller producer, natural production also introduces more flexibility. Wheatley says, "With lower capital requirements, natural and organic production make it easier for smaller producers to enter and exit the markets. This allows them to remain in the market many years, despite volatile market prices."

The Minnesota Pork Producers' Association funded the project. For more information or a copy of the study, contact Wheatley at (612) 669- 0331, whea0025@umn.edu.

Wallace Center report urges cautious approach to genetically engineered crops

The varieties and uses of genetically engineered (transgenic) crops have grown much more rapidly than our ability to understand or appropriately regulate them, according to a new report from the Henry A. Wallace Center for Agricultural & Environmental Policy at Winrock International.

Despite a large volume of popular literature, adequate scientific research into the benefits and risks these crops pose has not been done, the report says. It recommends greater public research funding, revised research policies and a better regulatory system to ensure that transgenic crops deliver public environmental benefits and avoid ecological hazards.

The report is available by calling (703) 525-9430, or wallacenter@winrock.org. The full report is also available on the Internet at www.winrock.org/transgenic.pdf.

Report says organic research lacking nationally, but Minnesota shines

A new report chides the nation's land grant research institutions for "largely failing organic farmers," but commends Minnesota for having a "pioneering organic research program."

According to the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) report, there's "an overwhelming lack of investment in organic systems research by our public agricultural institutions. Of the almost 900,000 available research acres in the land grant system, only .02 percent, or 151 acres, is devoted to certified organic research."

The report says only Minnesota plus Iowa, Ohio, North Carolina and West Virginia have certified organic research acreage. Seven other states have research land in transition to organic certification.

The report lauded the Organic Conversion Project at the University of Minnesota's Southwest Research and Outreach Center in Lamberton, where over 40 farmers are converting part or all of their farms to organic production. The project includes a hotline for organic farmers to call for production information from mentor organic growers.

In addition to the Organic Conversion Project, researcher Elizabeth Dyck works with the Elwell Agroecology Farm, a certified organic farm located at the Lamberton center. Dyck may be contacted at (507) 752-7372, dyck@ssu.southwest.msus.edu.

In another project, U of M Southern Research and Outreach Center researcher Gregg Johnson has done on-farm work characterizing a Canada thistle patch on an organic farm using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Global Positioning Systems (GPS). The work is ultimately designed to come up with effective control strategies matched to weed biotype traits. Johnson may be reached at (507) 835-3620.

"Minnesota has many notable resources for organic producers," the national report says. "In 1999, Minnesota passed the only legislation in the country that reimburses organic farmers' certification costs. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Program publishes a 'Greenbook' (resources guide) every year." For more information, call (651) 296-7673.

The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA), housed at the University of Minnesota, has funded some organic research that is focused on policy and economics, the report said. You can contact MISA at (800) 909-MISA, misamail@umn.edu. The national report is available at www.ofrf.org.

'Not knowing' is major farm stress; publication offers new perspective

Stress on farm families and couples today can come from many sources: low prices, bad weather, financial problems, and crop pests. But the most difficult farming stress to deal with is "not knowing," says a University of Minnesota family social scientist.

"It's not knowing what is happening or what might happen, not knowing what you are doing wrong, what you can do to fix the situation, not knowing if you can prevent total loss," says Pauline Boss. She calls such uncertainties "ambiguous loss."

"The ambiguity, more than the event of loss, can immobilize and depress-and increase marital tension," says Boss.

She notes that most family farmers are not on their own anymore. They're not in charge of their own destinies and not able to succeed even with hard work. They are intertwined with an urban sprawl and a global economy so pervasive that their devotion to the land no longer determines success or failure.

"The stress for family farmers today is complicated by a shadowy and ambiguous threat toward a way of life, a loss of a lifestyle connected to the land," says Boss. "When that lifestyle is threatened or lost, the lack of clarity about the future of the family farm brings worry, confusion, conflict and even shame. These feelings all lead to stress that can reach dangerously high levels and can result in too much drinking, verbal and physical abuse of loved ones, and even suicide."

But Boss believes farm families and couples can find hope in the midst of ambiguous loss. She believes that families who look at their situation in a new way can find new opportunities and options and feel more in control again. She is the author of a new University of Minnesota Extension Service publication that offers insight into how to accomplish this. It's a 16-page discussion guide entitled "*Losing a Way of Life? Ambiguous Loss in Farm Families.*"

The publication presents a new way of viewing uncertainty. It's designed to help farm families get a better handle on stress, change, making decisions and family life. It contains exercises and coping tips for family members of all ages. A section written with the help of an agricultural economist gives realistic ideas on business options for family farms. The publication is designed not only for farm families, but also for lenders, financial advisors, clergy, counselors and educators working with farm families and couples. It's a follow-up to Boss's book, "Ambiguous Loss," published by Harvard University Press, out in paperback in 2000.

The discussion guide "Losing a Way of Life? Ambiguous Loss in Farm Families" is available for purchase from county offices of the University of Minnesota Extension Service. Ask for item [BU-07614](#). It's also available for purchase by e-mail at order@extension.umn.edu or by credit card at (612) 624-4900 or (800) 876-8636.

Impressions from the Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference

I just attended the 12th Annual Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference March 15-17, 2001 in LaCrosse, Wis., and I was impressed by audience's size, diversity, positive attitude and thirst for knowledge.

The attendance of roughly 1,200 people makes the conference one of the largest organic conferences in the U.S. The audience included about an equal mix of men and women; and of experienced and novice

farmers, non-farmers who want to start farming, conventional farmers who want to switch to organic farming, educators and personnel from government agencies and non-profit organizations.

With the demand for organic products still growing at better than 20 percent per year, most attendees were optimistic about the future of organic agriculture and they packed the workshop sessions to learn more about organic standards, production and marketing.

An organic farmer has suggested that when we approach policy makers with ideas for organic-friendly programs and policies, we use the argument that organic agriculture reduces government farm payments and increases tax revenues. Even though many conventional farmers receive government assistance, many of them still don't make enough money to pay income taxes. But many farmers who have switched to organic agriculture collect smaller government payments, and because they've reduced costs and increased revenues, they now have to pay income taxes!

Critics claim that organic agriculture can't "feed the world." However, farmer experience and university research show comparable yields for conventional and well-managed organic systems.

It's hard to say whether organic agriculture is the best solution for long-term sustainability of society, but the 1,200 conference attendees make a convincing argument that organic agriculture is definitely worth considering! —By Bill Wilcke

(Wilcke is the sustainable agriculture professional development coordinator for the U of M Extension Service and acting administrator, Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. He may be reached at (612) 625-8205, wilck001@umn.edu).

Calendar of events, 2001

April 8, **Community Food and Farm Festival**, Hamline University, St. Paul, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Call (651) 766-8895.

May 21-23, **31st Annual BioCycle National Conference: Composting and Organics Recycling**, Radisson Riverfront Hotel, St. Paul. Call (610) 967-4135, or visit www.biocycle.net.

May 24-June 7, **Sustainable Agriculture Tour of Cuba and Haiti**, sponsored by Global Exchange. Call (415) 558-9486, ext. 231, or download an application at www.globalexchange.org.

About this newsletter...

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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.