

Sustainable Agriculture

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Raising hogs in open pens, hoop structures brings a price premium for Dwight Ault

Southeastern Minnesota farmer Dwight Ault started moving away from a conventional confinement system when he built his first hoop structure in 1997. He liked the hoop house so much he put up another one three years later; now he's modifying his old confinement finishing barn to operate like a hoop structure so he can finish all the pigs his 300 sows produce.

The change has reduced animal stress, improved working conditions and increased profits, Ault says. "The real value of hoop structures for hogs is the mental and physical environment the animals have to live in and the farmer has to work in," he says.

He thinks there's a lot less stress on hogs in his hoop structures. "The pigs don't intimidate each other as much because they have something to chew on and keep busy and occupied," he says. "Hoop structures let pigs act like pigs."

With his confinement system, Ault says it was "really unnerving to go in the confinement barn and hear pigs fighting and see blood splattered all over the place from tail biting or ear biting." With his hoop system, he doesn't even clip tails, something he'd never have considered if the animals were in confinement.

His more humane production practices bring a premium of four to five dollars per cwt., which more than offsets the extra cost of feed and labor. By selling to Niman Pork Ranch Company, he gets a premium because consumers are willing to pay more for animals raised and harvested in compliance with Animal Welfare Institute guidelines.

You can find more details on Ault's operation and the advantages and disadvantages of hoop housing by going to www.farmprofitability.org/pigs.pdf on the Internet. That's the website of the North Central Institute for Small Farm Profitability and includes links to other case studies on strategies that work. -- *Adapted from "Letting Pigs be Pigs: Building a Better Hog Operation," on the above website.*

NSF survey shows decline in public support for genetic engineering

Data from a National Science Foundation (NSF) survey show a gradual decline in public support for genetic engineering over the past 15 years. The shift can be seen most clearly among the college educated and those classified as attentive to science and technology.

In no year has a majority of Americans agreed that the benefits of genetic engineering outweighed the harmful results. In 2001, 40 percent of those surveyed thought that the benefits outweighed the harmful results, down from 49 percent in 1985. However, the number of people who think the harms outweigh the benefits has also declined in most years, from 39 percent in 1985 to 33 percent in 2001. Concurrently, the percentage saying that the benefits are equal to the harms increased from 12 percent in 1985 to 28 percent in 2001.

Anti-biotechnology sentiments are much more common in Europe than in the United States. In addition, the number of people harboring negative perceptions of biotechnology has increased in both Europe and Canada during the past few years, especially when compared with attitudes in the United States. These latest findings are from an international study conducted in late 1999 and early 2000 in the United States, Europe, and Canada.

On a 10-question "pop quiz" on biotechnology, most Americans, Europeans and Canadians gave the incorrect answer (true) to the statement "ordinary tomatoes do not contain genes, while genetically modified tomatoes do," and fewer than half the respondents in each region knew that animal genes can be transferred into plants. On the same quiz, Americans and Canadians seemed to know more than Europeans about the science of biotechnology; they averaged 6.2 and 6.1 correctly answered questions, respectively, compared with Europeans, who averaged 5.4 correctly answered questions.

In response to surveys conducted in late 1999 and early 2000, about half of the Americans thought that genetic engineering would "improve our way of life in the next 20 years." The corresponding statistics for Europe and Canada were 38 and 50 percent, respectively. However, a sizable minority of Americans (29 percent) said the opposite, that genetic engineering "will make things worse" during the next 20 years, compared with 31 percent of Europeans and 40 percent of Canadians.

In all three surveys, biotechnology ranked sixth among the seven technologies that respondents were asked about (only nuclear energy ranked lower). In contrast, more than 80 percent of Americans and Canadians said that solar energy, computers, and telecommunications would improve our way of life in the next 20 years. The corresponding European percentages were somewhat lower but still greater than 70 percent. In addition, approximately 70 percent of Americans, Canadians, and Europeans each thought that the Internet would improve their lives during the next 20 years.

The report may be viewed at www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind02/c7/c7h.htm on the Internet.

Changes in Regional Partnership staffing announced

Cynthia Pansing has accepted the coordinator position for the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships. The Regional Partnerships bring together citizens and University faculty, staff and students to identify and address issues affecting the sustainability of Minnesota's natural resource-based industries, including agriculture and tourism.

In five regions across the state, citizen-University boards of directors fund projects that promote the long-term social, economic and environmental health of their communities. Pansing has M.A. degrees in urban planning and anthropology from UCLA. She also has lived and worked in Minnesota--from 1998-2000 she was the research manager for the State and Local Policy Program at the U of M's Humphrey Institute. She brings a strong background in project management, grant writing, policy research and analysis, as well as on-the-ground community planning.

She begins her work July 8 and can be reached via the MISA office at (612) 625-8235 or misamail@umn.edu.

Steven Daley Laursen, associate dean of the College of Natural Resources and director of the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, recently resigned from the University of Minnesota. His work with the Regional Partnerships for the past two years has been a real asset to the program and we thank him for his contributions. Steve will begin his new position as dean of the College of Natural Resources at the University of Idaho late this summer.

Minnesota farmers featured in collection of writings

A new book "The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with ecosystems," has been published by the Land Stewardship Project (LSP).

Contributors to the collection of writings promote the idea that restoring a relationship between farming and the natural world enhances the sustainability of both, said LSP's associate director Dana Jackson. She co-edited the book with her daughter, Laura Jackson, a University of Northern Iowa biology professor.

"There is a connection between the endangered species list and the grocery list, and we want to show it doesn't have to be a negative relationship," says Dana Jackson. She says the book rejects the idea that ecological sacrifice zones are a necessary part of feeding a hungry world. "This book offers compelling examples of an alternative agriculture that can produce not only healthful food, but also produce functioning ecosystems and habitat for native species."

In putting together the book, the Jacksons brought together a group of writers who represent the fields of sustainable agriculture, conservation biology and ecological restoration to link food and farming to biological diversity.

The "Farm as Natural Habitat" describes how farmers, including several Minnesotans, are making serious changes in the way they produce food on the land. Dave and Florence Minar, who have a grass-based livestock farm near New Prague, are among the farmers featured in the book. "Everything we do on our farm is guided by our goals of being good neighbors and good stewards long into the future," said Dave Minar. "We're not the only ones doing this: there's a growing group of farmers in Minnesota who are proving profits and conservation can go hand-in-hand."

For ordering information on "The Farm as Natural Habitat," log onto www.landstewardshipproject.org or www.islandpress.org. The book can also be ordered from Island Press by calling (800) 828-1302.

LSP selected to develop 'Buy Local' food campaign

LSP has been selected to develop a "Buy Local" food marketing campaign over the next two years. The campaign, called "Pride of the Prairie," will nurture strong regional markets for locally grown food in western Minnesota.

LSP is one of 10 organizations chosen as part of a national Buy Local initiative supported by Fires of Hope, a national nonprofit organization that promotes community-based food systems that are environmentally, economically and socially sustainable. For more information, contact LSP's Montevideo office at (320) 269-2105 or lspwest@landstewardshipproject.org.

May 18 public forum will feature panel discussion on antibiotics and livestock

A public forum titled "Antibiotics and Livestock: Public Health, Public Policy," will take place Saturday, May 18 from 10 a.m. to noon at the Malcolm Moos Health Sciences Tower, University of Minnesota. Panelists representing public health, veterinary science, farming, the feed industry and the Minnesota State Legislature will discuss sub-therapeutic antibiotic use in livestock.

"This health issue, while it has gained a good deal of attention in the press, remains a source of confusion to many people," says Helen Palmer of the League of Women Voters of Minnesota, one of the forum sponsors. "The League is offering a balanced look at the latest facts relating to this practice."

The featured panelists will include, Dwight Ault, a farmer from southeastern Minnesota; John Deen, U of M veterinarian and director of the University's Swine Center; Senator Steve Murphy, chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee; Bill Sperber, Corporate Food Safety, Cargill; and David Wallinga, an M.D. and director of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

The event is co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters, the Institute for Trade and Agriculture Policy and the intellectual property law firm of Intellware International. Call (651) 224-5445 for more information.

Calendar of events, 2002

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

May 18. **Antibiotics and Livestock: Public Health, Public Policy** (see above article).

May 21-22. **Application of By-products as Soil Amendments**, Cloquet Forestry Center, (218) 879-0858.

June 21-23. **Renewable Energy & Sustainable Living Fair**, Custer, Wis., www.the-mrea.org

June 23-25. **Minnesota Rural Summit 2002: Linking Health & Economic Development**, Duluth, www.minnesotaruralpartners.org/summit

July 14-17. **American Forage and Grassland Council Annual Conference/Trade Show**, Best Western Thunderbird Hotel/Convention Center, Bloomington, Minn., www.afgc.org.

August 17. **Windy River Renewable Energy Sustainable Agriculture Fair, Lion's Park, Long Prairie**, (320) 594-2456 or converse@rea-alp.com

Aug. 21. **Digesters for Managing Animal Waste**, Holiday Inn, St. Cloud, (651) 645-6159, x21, or cnelson@mnproject.org.

What we're about

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Also check MISA's home page at www.misa.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.**

To stimulate thinking and discussion about sustainability, we try to present items that reflect different points of view. This being the case, we aren't promoting and don't necessarily agree with everything we publish.