

Sustainable Agriculture

Volume 3, Issue 2 –February 1995

They don't trust the government--or farmers

When it comes to agricultural chemicals and food safety issues, the majority of people don't trust either government or farmers, according to a new report. People don't trust government to set or enforce food safety standards, or farmers to ensure that the foods they sell are safe.

The public generally believes that insects, diseases and other pests need to be controlled, but thinks there are effective alternatives to pesticides. And because about half of the public doesn't believe these alternatives are more expensive, many people perceive little or no benefit from pesticide use. The report was issued by the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST), a nonprofit scientific organization, and reviews data from a number of surveys regarding public perceptions of pesticides and animal drugs.

"Consumers have diverse views and preferences about agricultural chemical use," said Eileen van Ravenswaay of Michigan State University, author of the report. About one-fourth of the public perceives a great chance of harm from pesticide residues in food, but about the same percentage perceives very little or no chance. "There is evidence that the public is willing to pay more for tougher pesticide residue standards and their intensified enforcement," van Ravenswaay said. "Whether public willingness to pay can offset the cost of reducing or eliminating agrichemical use is unknown. In some cases, it may not be possible to produce acceptable foods without agrichemical use."

Consumers differ greatly in terms of their reported willingness to purchase foods labeled pesticide free. Most say they are willing to pay 5 percent more for guarantees of reduced pesticide residues. About one-quarter to one-third are unwilling to pay more, and between 5 to 10 percent are willing to pay substantially more. Minor levels of pest damage are acceptable if consumers believe that pesticide residues are lower, but otherwise they are not.

Regarding the new animal drugs bovine somatotropin (BST) and porcine somatotropin (PST), there is very low consumer awareness of either. Over a third of consumers say they do not know about the potential health risks, and many express skepticism about whether government ensures their safety in food.

Public Perceptions of Agrichemicals is available for \$10 from CAST, 4420 West Lincoln Way, Ames, IA 50014-3447, (515) 292-2125. CAST is a nonprofit organization composed of 30 scientific societies and many individual, student, company, nonprofit, and associate society members.

Sustainable Farming Association annual meeting March 11

The fourth annual meeting of the Minnesota Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) is Saturday, March 11 from 9 a.m. to 4:40 p.m. at the Victorian Inn in Hutchinson. The keynote speakers are Dick and Sharon

Thompson, Boone, Iowa. They will discuss the latest research comparing a 3,000 acre conventional crop farm with a 300 acre diversified livestock farm and how these two systems affect rural communities.

Other presenters and workshops include Dana Jackson, associate director of the Land Stewardship Project; dairy farmers Dave Minar and Randy Meyer on Holistic Resource Management (HRM) and grass-based dairying; and beef farmer Mike Rupprecht on rotational grass-based beef production and direct marketing.

There will also be presentations on alternative energy production, lower inputs and increased profit for a greater quality of life, and sustainable cropping systems. Pre-registration by March 6 is \$20 per person plus \$10 for each additional family member. Late registration is \$30 per person and \$20 per additional family member.

To pre-register, send a check payable to SFA to: Cannon River SFA, 328 Central Ave., Suite 5, Faribault, MN 55021. Call (507) 334-0014 for more information. Make room reservations directly with the Victorian Inn at 1-800-369-0145 and mention the SFA conference for a special rate.

New graduate degree minor in sustainable agriculture systems

A new graduate minor program in Sustainable Agriculture Systems at the University of Minnesota was officially approved by the Board of Regents in January 1995. M.S. and Ph.D. students enrolled in the minor in Sustainable Agriculture Systems will acquire a broad understanding of agriculture and related disciplines through interdisciplinary courses and hands-on experience with issues relevant to sustainable agriculture through an internship experience. The minor in Sustainable Agriculture Systems will prepare students to work with diverse issues related to the long-term viability of agriculture and to use holistic approaches to evaluating problems and building food production systems.

The minor in Sustainable Agriculture Systems was developed with the cooperative efforts of University faculty, students, agricultural producers, and representatives of community organizations. Funds for development of the program are provided by the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. The program is unique in the country because of the involvement of agricultural producers, community organizations, and public agencies in overall program development, course participation, and the internship program.

The curriculum is interdisciplinary and emphasizes the interconnections between agriculture, ecology, sociology, history, and economics. Several new courses have been, or are being, developed specifically for the minor, including: Colloquium in Sustainable Agriculture, Agroecology Colloquium, and History of Agriculture in the U.S., Agricultural Systems Analysis, and Field Experience in Sustainable Agriculture.

The internship gives students the opportunity to gain first-hand experience with a non-profit organization or agricultural producer working on issues relevant to sustainable agriculture. Students can gain experience with alternative farming and food systems, community organization, public education and communication of issues of concern, net-working, and procedures of change including policy making, implementation and regulation. Internship opportunities are available with, but not

Limited to: individual farmers using alternative practices; Land Stewardship Project; Minnesota Food Association; The Minnesota Project; Organic Growers & Buyers Association; Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota; and Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

The minor is open to students enrolled in any graduate program of study at the University of Minnesota. Brochures, posters, and other information about the minor program are available. Contact: Dr. Craig Sheaffer, Director of Graduate Studies, c/o Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, 411 Borlaug Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108-1013; phone: 612/625-8235; fax: 612/625-1268; email: sheaf001@maroon.tc.umn.edu

Use your "poorest" two acres to help protect the environment

"Every farm has its poorest two acres," was something Dick Anderson often said as he described the wildlife area at the University of Minnesota's Southern Experiment Station at Waseca.

Anderson, former superintendent at Waseca, would go on to explain that those two acres may be poor for crop production, but very suitable for a wildlife habitat. "Dick's 'two acres' thing really got people thinking," says Gyles Randall, soil scientist at the Waseca station.

"When non-farm visitors tour the station, the wildlife area turns them on more than looking at cows, corn and soybeans," Randall says. "The aesthetics and pleasing attitude that goes with wildlife conservation is important in today's society. We need more wildlife areas to show our city friends we're serious about our stewardship ideals and not fence row to fence row crop farming."

Expiration of the Conservation Reserve Plan (CRP) over the next few years may release thousands of acres--many of them poor crop acres-- for other uses. "Converting these acres to row crop production will likely lead to high erosion losses, with the sediment potentially ending up in our surface waters," Randall says

"We need to find other uses for this land. It may be suitable for the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) program. Or, a small woodlot or wildlife area may be a possibility," he says. (For information on the RIM program, contact the Department of Natural Resources at 500 Lafayette Rd., St. Paul, MN 55101, 612-296-6157).

Sediment and nutrient loading of our rivers and lakes poses a serious problem, Randall says, and "Society is looking to agriculture to do its part to remedy this situation." Buffer strips (or riparian strips) of permanent grass along the edges of drainage ditches, streams and lakes can help minimize sediment loadings in our surface waters. Randall says the buffer strips should be joined together in "corridors" to connect with trees and water bodies for more effective wildlife habitat.

"These alternative land uses may not be profitable to the pocketbook. But they can be profitable in terms of resource stewardship, personal values, visibility and public recreation. How we use these 'poorest two acres of land' may contribute greatly to society's perception of the American farmer.

"This winter, let's think about how one or more of these land use options can be implemented to protect our natural resources and build a stronger relationship with our urban cousins," Randall says.

Banding phosphate, potash boosts profits and the environment

Banding phosphate and potash on corn and small grains can increase profits. Banding can also reduce chances of soil erosion and surface water contamination, says George Rehm, soil scientist with the University of Minnesota's Extension Service.

If you're using current recommendations from the University of Minnesota, Rehm says rates of phosphate and potash for corn and small grain can be cut in half if they're applied in a band instead of broadcast and incorporated before planting. Economic benefits aside, banded placement can have a very positive effect on environmental quality.

When phosphate fertilizer is placed in a band below the soil surface, the applied phosphate is not subject to loss from soil erosion. And if phosphorus is not attached to the sediments lost in the erosion process, contamination of surface waters is reduced. So banded placement is a good option if you're thinking about a new way of fertilizer placement this spring, Rehm adds.

Regional training seminar at Rochester March 22

"Innovative Whole Farm Management for Sustainability" is the title of a regional seminar at the Holiday Inn South in Rochester, Wednesday, March 22. The program has been designed to help develop working relationships among farmer-members of the Sustainer's Coalition and agency staff members. There will be a farmer panel discussion on sustainability. Speakers will include Jerry DeWitt, coordinator of sustainable agriculture programs at Iowa State University and Chuck Francis, director of the Sustainable Agriculture Center, University of Nebraska. If you have questions or plan to attend, call one of these extension educators: Tim Wagar (507-280- 2866) or Chuck Fick (507-835-3422).

Organic Growers and Buyers Association (OGBA) needs certification members

Qualified certification members are needed by the OGBA. If you have education or experience in agriculture and related fields and are interested in learning more about the organic/sustainable industry, call (612) 636-7933 for more information. Part-time, flexible hours with an hourly rate plus mileage.

We can use your story ideas

Keep the story ideas coming. Send them to the editor: Jack Sperbeck, 405 Coffey Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108, Tel. (612) 625-1794. E-mail: jsperbeck@extension.umn.edu. Other editorial board members are Phil Larsen (612) 624-7451, Don Olson (612) 625-9292 and Helene Murray (612) 625-0220.

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.

The University of Minnesota is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, or sexual orientation.