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Center for Sustainable Agricultural Systems Newsletter January-February 1996

1996 Sustainable Ag Training Workshops

What do Iowa farmers, Michigan NRCS specialists, and Kansas Extension educators have in common? They share with colleagues across the Midwest a need to learn more about sustainable agriculture and convey this information to others.

Delegations from the 12-state North Central Region came together in December to review 1995 programs and plan 1996 activities of the North Central Sustainable Agriculture Training Program (NCSATP). Robert Allerton Conference Center, near Monticello, Illinois, was the site of the year-end meeting which focused on a review of NCSATP and state activities, new training methods, and preparation for the 1996 workshops to be held in June and July.

Several hours were dedicated to state reports. Participants went into considerable detail on the philosophy, materials, types of presentations, and general reception by Extension and other audiences.

A highlight of the meeting was a tour of a nearby farm with 1,145 acres under a corn-soybean rotation and 95 acres in organic production. The farmer described his philosophy and goals and showed participants fields, windbreaks, equipment, and a reestablished prairie. Back at the conference center, he asked the group two questions: (1) Should I convert another 40 acres to organic production? and (2) How can I change my five-year rotation to a four-year rotation? Participants offered many suggestions. One Extension educator wrote, "I tend to close a deal too quickly, so I enjoyed the variety of questions and discussions that followed the tour."

The theme for the 1996 train-the-trainer workshops, **Shared Leadership, Shared Responsibility**, reflects a clear mandate of needs expressed by participants at previous NCSATP events. With the reduction in budgets and positions in both Extension and NRCS, it is becoming increasingly important to find ways to share the responsibility of designing education and training efforts in sustainable agriculture. Suggestions for topics and methods in 1996 included: marketing, whole-farm planning, leadership development models, facilitator training, study circles, decision cases, and resource notebooks.

Sustainable agriculture training of Extension and other personnel was mandated in Chapter 3 of the 1990 farm bill, and funding was made available in 1994 through the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program.

For more information about the NCSATP, contact Heidi Carter at the CSAS office.

Submitted by Heidi Carter and Charles Francis

Applications for SARE Producer Grants Due May 1

The North Central Region SARE program is inviting applications for 1996 Producer-Initiated Sustainable Agriculture Grants. Competitive grants of up to \$5,000 for individual producers (\$10,000 for groups of producers) are available to study sustainable production and marketing. Applicants must live in the North Central Region (IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, WI). For more information or an application packet, contact the NCR SARE office, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 13A Activities Bldg., PO Box 830840, Lincoln, NE 68583-0840, 402-472-7081.

Bender Answers Questions on January Telecast

Extension educators, farmers, and others in agriculture were given an opportunity to expand their horizons about integrated, whole-farm systems and organic practices. Jim Bender, farmer and author from Weeping Water, Nebraska, and member of the CSAS citizen's advisory committee, responded to questions during a two-hour telecast from the UNL campus on January 5, 1996. These questions were generated by prior distribution of his 1994 book, *Future Harvest: Pesticide-free Farming*, to more than 200 educators in the region.

The program focused on Bender's 642-acre farming operation and how he implements his philosophy to minimize soil erosion and farm without chemical pesticides and fertilizers. A key feature of the farm is more than 30 miles of terraces and a scrupulous adherence to a conservation ethic in maintenance of terraces and waterways. Another feature is the integration of crops and livestock, an approach that Bender considers essential to successful organic farming on any scale beyond a few acres. The details of his farming operation are given in the book.

Bender has diversified cropping, including corn, soybeans, grain sorghum, alfalfa, red and sweet clover, turnips, rye, wheat, oats, and other specialty crops. These are rotated on a regular basis with pasture land, while some areas are used exclusively for cattle. During the winter months, crop residues are used for maintaining the cow herds.

Since there are four distinct tracts of land, a small cow/calf herd is maintained on each one. Bender has minimal, but adequate, cattle handling facilities on each of the four sites. Replacement heifers are taken from one herd and placed in another to maintain vigor. He uses feed produced on the farm, and thus adds value through the animals before they leave the farm gate.

Another value-added feature is sale of organic products, such as soybeans. Bender also sells certified seed. Highest quality alfalfa hay is destined for the market, while lower grade forage is used to maintain the cow herd. He also uses a combination of cool- and warm-season grasses as well as grassed waterways, turnips, and crop residues to feed cattle through the year.

In addition to questions from the studio audience, viewers phoned or faxed questions from 13 states and Manitoba during the program. Most focused on specific cultural practices, from fertility to weed management. There was also interest in agricultural policy, the opinions of lenders and others in the community, and the level of support that beginning farmers would need to implement a similar philosophy in farming.

Copies of the taped program are available for \$10 each from the CSAS office. Bender's book is available for \$21 plus \$2.50 s&h from the University of Nebraska Press, P.O. Box 880520, Lincoln, NE 68588-0520, 402-472-3584.

This project was organized by the CSAS and supported by a grant from the North Central Region SARE program as part of its Chapter 3 training activities.

Submitted by Charles Francis and Heidi Carter

Nebraska Environmental Trust Proposals Due April 10

Priorities for this year's round of funding are the same as previous years: advance critical habitat restoration and preservation, surface water quality, ground water quality, and the creation of recycling markets and solid waste reduction. One change this year is that applications from UNL do not have to include indirect costs in the budget.

For an application packet call the Trust, 402-471-5409. If you wish to discuss the possibility of developing an interdisciplinary proposal through either the CSAS or the Center for Grassland Studies, call Pam Murray, 402-472-9383.

Intern Program Begins Second Year

How many undergraduate students at the University of Nebraska have the opportunity to start farming or ranching? Given the high costs of land and machinery, difficult access to operating loans, and narrow profit margins, the climate at times appears bleak for the beginning farmer.

Seven UNL students have discovered a new way to start in agriculture. They are the second group of student interns in the experiential education program initiated by the CSAS last year. During the spring semester, they are enrolled in a 3-credit seminar that deals with farm planning, choice of crops and inputs, and sound financial budgeting for the whole farm. With the help of Richard Olson, Intern Coordinator, and several participating faculty and farmers, interns are planning the systems for five operating farms to be implemented in the cropping season of 1996: conventional corn-soybean

rotation, diversified conventional crop rotation, organic cash crops, agroforestry system, and pasture-based beef production system.

During the summer terms, students put this planning into practice. With the advice of a resident farm manager and several farmer mentors, they plant crops, manage fields and equipment, and follow the cycle through to harvest in the fall. The micro-farms of 12 to 15 acres each are located at the Agricultural Research and Development Center near Ithaca, Nebraska. In the fall semester, interns harvest crops and analyze the results in terms of productivity, economic return, and energy efficiency. Students make all decisions about what inputs to use and how to meet the nineteen learning objectives for the year-long course. The "magnificent seven" interns are meeting two evenings each week and are well on the way to a productive educational experience.

The project is financed by a two-year grant from the North Central Region SARE Program. We have just submitted a proposal for renewal of the grant for an additional two years, and for expansion of the project to cover 12 undergraduate student interns. We are also preparing a color brochure outlining the objectives of the program (contact the CSAS for a copy) and will seek corporate and other sponsorship of some of the learning activities.

Submitted by Charles Francis and Richard Olson

Agroforestry Center Expands Programs

The National Agroforestry Center, formerly the Center for Semiarid Agroforestry (located on the UNL campus), is expanding its Research and Development, Technology Transfer and Applications, and International Technology Exchange programs by forming a partnership with its parent agency, the USDA Forest Service, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) is providing initial funding for the Center's new International Technology Exchange program, which will be coordinated by Sarah Workman. The CSAS has a history of working cooperatively with the Center, and we look forward to an even closer working relationship as Sarah joins the Center in February.

Agroforestry integrates agricultural production with natural resource conservation, environmental protection, and human needs. It involves such practices as managing and improving riparian environments, alley cropping, windbreaks, tree/pasture systems, and living snowfences. Properly applied agroforestry technologies can increase crop production, improve water quality, decrease soil erosion, filter pesticides in runoff, and reduce flooding for farms, ranches, and communities.

For more information about the center, or to be added to the mailing list for its quarterly newsletter, contact Bill Rietveld, Program Manager, USDA Forest Service, Rocky

Mountain Station/USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Agroforestry Center, East Campus - UNL, Lincoln, NE 68583-0822; 402-437-5178, ext. 27.

Resources

The Progress of Our Dreams (90-min. video). \$25. Alan Atkisson introduces a comprehensive picture of what sustainable development means both in theory and in practice, drawing on examples from around the Pacific Northwest, the U.S., and the rest of the world. Although the case examples discussed focus primarily on community development, the assessment framework introduced can also be used to assess the contributions individual projects, such as those in agriculture and natural resources, make to the overall sustainability of human and ecological systems. Bulletin Office, Cooperative Extension, Cooper Bldg., Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-5912, 509-335-2857.

Deadly Fields (58-min. video). \$24.95. Examines health effects of pesticide use in U.S. agriculture, particularly for farmers and applicators, and interviews range of people involved in pesticide issues. Describes pesticide reduction and elimination strategies such as IPM and organic farming, and explains biotechnology's purported benefits and some of its dangers. Great Plains National, 1800 N. 33rd St., Lincoln, NE 68583, 402-472-2007, or 800-228-4630.

Citizen's Guide to Pest Control and Pesticide Safety. Free. U.S. EPA provides lay language overview of pest management and pesticide use and safety, including non-chemical pest controls and integrated pest management. Describes methods for reducing pesticide hazards during application, storage and disposal, provides guidelines for pesticide poisoning identification and first aid, and suggests practices for reducing pesticide exposure from food and drift. National Center for Environmental Publications and Information, PO Box 42419, Cincinnati, OH 45242, 703-305-5017.

Healthy Food, Healthy Farms: Pest Management in the Public Interest. \$13.70. Examines yields, costs and extent of pesticide use reduction on eight organic farms in the U.S. compared to nearby conventional farms producing similar crops. Concludes that "science-based" organic farming can significantly cut production expenses, assure safe foods and clean drinking water and achieve yields comparable to conventional farms. National Campaign for Pesticide Policy Reform, 666 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20003, 202-547-9009.

Agroecology: The Science of Sustainable Agriculture, Miguel Altieri. \$26. This 1995 edition updates Altieri's 1989 book. Provides in-depth analysis of agroecological principles and practices, including discussions of agroecology's theoretical basis, specific agroecological practices and technologies, ecological approaches to managing insects, weeds and pathogens and transition processes for conventional farms implementing agroecological principles. Presents case studies of agroecological systems worldwide and examines organic, traditional and conventional farming systems. Westview Press, 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, CO 80301, 303-444-3541.

Salad Bar Beef. \$30. New 368-page book explains and illustrates how with small acreage you can enter the beef business profitably; it covers all phases, from conception to slaughter to marketing. Polyface, Inc., Rt 1, Box 281, Swoope, VA 24479, 540-885-3590.

Basic Formula to Create Community Supported Agriculture. \$10. Workbook by Robyn Van En includes budgets, organizational details and recommendations. Indian Line Farm, RR 3, Box 85, Jug End Rd, Great Barrington, MA 01230, 413-528-4374.

The *Ag Bioethics Forum* newsletter from Iowa State U. is now only available on the World Wide Web:

http://www.public.iastate.edu/~grad_college/bioethics/

Strategies and Ideas in Sustainable Agriculture

Farmers from Iowa and Nebraska shared the spotlight with Extension educators to share ideas about cultural practices at a recent workshop in Hastings, Nebraska. Weed management, soil compaction, quality alfalfa, and biological insect control topics were presented in the day-long workshop attended by 70 people. This annual workshop organized by Paul Swanson, Extension Educator in Adams County, has evolved from a focus on ridge tillage to a broader consideration of appropriate and innovative cropping systems for the region.

One highlight was a video about Dick and Sharon Thompson's farming strategy; they farm 300 acres near Boone, Iowa, and complement crop production with swine and beef enterprises that consume both crops and residues. After the video, Sharon and Dick shared more details about their weed management approach without chemical herbicides. They use a combination of cover crops, no pre-plant tillage, rotary hoeing, an aggressive cultivation to successfully reduce weed populations to levels that don't affect crop yields. The Thompsons work closely with Iowa State University Extension as well as through the Practical Farmers of Iowa to share information with farmers across the state.

Tom Larson continues to amaze his audiences with creative options in crop management. He is well known for strip cropping rotation of corn-oat/turnip-soybean, exploring alternative crops, and intensive rotational grazing and high stocking rates on high quality pastures. This year Tom created a stir in the community of St. Edward when he and a neighbor planted grazing maize into snow covered ridges on December 8. This corn hybrid is used for direct grazing in the field, and has shown excellent cattle gains in some fields of northeast Nebraska. Tom says that corn seed is likely to sit in the field and then germinate and emerge at the right time in early May, even if planted in winter, in about 7 years out of 10. It's always exciting to see innovation in agriculture.

Current and future potentials for biological control of insects were outlined by Bob Wright, Extension Entomologist, who illustrated the talk with brilliant close-up slides of predators and parasitoids in action. These methods will provide growers with ways to effectively reduce chemical pesticide application by carefully targeting some insect

problems in crops. Soil quality measurement and how this can effect long-term crop production were described by Mark Liebig from the Agronomy Department. Alice Jones, Extension Soils Specialist showed slides that illustrated the symptoms of soil compaction in the field, and how plant root systems reacted to this situation. She advised growers of a number of ways to reduce this common problem in Nebraska. Alfalfa production and marketing tips were emphasized by Bruce Anderson, Extension Forage Specialist, who described the consistent markets in this region for high quality hay. He said the three most critical issues for making alfalfa profitable were marketing, marketing, and marketing.

An evaluation session for Extension specialists, educators, and key farmers explored the impacts of Paul Swanson's workshops over the past seven years. We looked at attendance, reaction of the audience to various topics, and apparent interest in the evolving focus on sustainable agriculture. Beyond the need for information on new and profitable cultural practices and crops, the group identified a number of potential new directions for the workshops:

- empowering clients to make changes, both on the farm and in the community
- relating the impact of farm level decisions to health of the family and the ecosystem
- using the theme of stewardship of land and other natural resources as an entry point
- incorporating multiple measures of success: yields, income, community viability
- developing a climate on the farm and in rural areas that encourages youth to stay
- accelerating the appreciation of values and quality of life as key issues in success
- encouraging more university programs that address tomorrow's challenges

There was a sense of optimism in this group of key educators and farmers. They view the alternative agriculture community as a source of innovation, excitement and strength. People who are exploring and testing new ideas are having fun in farming, and making it profitable at the same time. The group complemented Paul Swanson for continuing with this approach in meetings.

Submitted by Charles Francis

NSAS Annual Meeting Will Focus On Rural Communities

Are you concerned about the future of rural communities and family farms? If so, then be sure to attend the 1996 Annual Meeting of the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, on February 24th. Building Hope for Rural Communities is the theme of this meeting, which will feature exciting speakers and workshops, good food, and plenty of friendly people.

The featured speaker is Dr. Garth Youngberg, director of the Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture and former USDA Organic Farming Coordinator. Dr. Youngberg's keynote presentation will focus on expanding community support for

sustainable agriculture and creating a concrete vision for the future of American agriculture and its communities.

David Schafer, who with his wife produces beef, lamb, chicken, and pork on pasture in Trenton, Missouri, will present a workshop on marketing meat and poultry products directly to consumers. Other workshop topics include making the most of warm-season grasses, non-chemical weed control, organic gardening, growing and marketing herbs, creative start-up strategies for beginning farmers, and the future of the pork industry.

The meeting will be held at the New World Inn in Columbus, and will include lunch. Advance registration, due by February 12, costs \$20 for members and \$30 for non-members. Late registration costs an additional \$5. Accompanying family members or partners can attend for \$10, and full-time students are eligible for half-price admission. Registration begins at 8:00 a.m. For more information, contact NSAS at 402-254-2289.

COMING EVENTS

[Contact CSAS office for more information:](#)

Feb. 22-24

North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Conference, Saratoga Springs, NY

Feb. 24

Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society Annual Meeting, Columbus, NE

Feb. 27-Mar. 2

Third National IPM Symposium, Washington, DC

Feb. 27-28

Platte River Basin Ecosystem Symposium, Kearney, NE

Feb. 28

1996 Nebraska Vegetable Conference, Columbus, NE

Feb. 29

OCIA#3 meeting, Organic Specialty Crop Production and Marketing, Columbus, NE

Mar. 11-13

Annual Nebraska Water Conference, Omaha, NE

Mar. 22

Direct Marketing Conference, Ithaca, NE

Apr. 8-11

US EPA Nonpoint Source Pollution Management Workshop, Nebraska City, NE

June 3-21

Sustainable Agroecosystems and Environmental Issues Training Workshop
(includes two weeks travel through southern and central Great Plains), Canyon, TX

June 15-20

International Interdisciplinary Conference on the Environment, Newport, RI
June 20-23

National conference on the community assessment process, Lincoln, NE
July 17-18

Soil Quality: A Guide for Conservation (hands-on workshop using soil as
indicator of improved management), Ames, IA

Sep. 15-19
7th National Bioenergy Conference, Nashville, TN

Nov. 11-16
14th International Symposium on Sustainable Farming Systems, Colombo, Sri
Lanka

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available free in hard copy, and electronically via: SANET, PENPages, and the internal
IANRNEWS. Current and back issues, along with other sustainable agriculture
information is also available on the gopher: IANRVM.UNL.EDU.

For comments or questions, or to be added to the mailing list for hard copy, contact the
editor at the masthead address, or e-mail csas001@unlvm.unl.edu.

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