

April 5, 2007

Summary of Organic Conference call, 8:30-9:30 a.m.

Bill Wilcke, Pauline Nickel, Carmen Fernholz, Bud Markhart, Meg Moynihan, Noreen Thomas, Jim Riddle, Helene Murray

Pauline and Carmen described about a garden project in New Ulm that is working with disabled people to help provide employment and activities. Putting Green, Inc is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to engage people in fun, meaningful experiences that increase understanding of natural systems and inspire the adoption of sustainable practices in everyday life. They have 1.2 acres of land available for education landscaping for gardens. They are in the process of developing a business plan to help sustain activities.

Carmen discussed the garden project that is being led by Cornell University. They have a grant to raise vegetables in large quantities to provide institutional buyers with products. SWOC at Lamberton will participate in grant activities to explore raising organic vegetables in enough volume to provide packers with product to process. This project will be featured as part of the Organic Field Day to be held July 11. Bud suggested that Vince Fritz be contacted as he is the commercial vegetable contact here at the U of MN. Noreen noted that it would be good to specifically target Master Gardeners to attract them to this type of activity, and also to the April 13 "All things organic" workshop.

Helene noted that the "Minnesota Guide to Organic Certification" publication is available in print and on line (www.misa.umn.edu and www.organicecology.umn.edu) and is getting good press. Extension sent out a press release about it this week. Also of note is that Mike White's May-term course focusing on slow food in Italy is fully booked with 25 students. The Marketing Local Foods publication with a target audience of producers will be available very soon. She attended Representative Peterson's "Homegrown Economy" session in Morris on Monday and said there were over 300 people present.

Bud said the Student Organic Farm is coming along with students already active in getting ready to plant. A seed saving project has been funded for a student intern to work on, and a Beautiful U Day grant has been received to improve the visibility of the student farm. The new Bell Museum will be built across the street from the farm and folks are interacting to see that landscaping is complementary. Bud has received an email from a student in France who would like to come to the University to do an internship -- the student farm is the reason for his interest and we are seeing a number of positive ripple effects from this endeavor.

Bill said that the call for SARE pre-proposals is being announced. Additionally, the call for professional development proposals is out and the focus this year is on bioenergy. www.sare.org/ncrsare

Meg attended the ABCs of Organic session on Wednesday in Caledonia; about 40 people were in attendance. She noted that the Economic Development Authority folks were on hand and are a good group to interact with on this topic. She noted that the farm business management program has been enrolling organic farmers and is about to release data from them; a summary of data is being compiled and hopefully will be ready by the end of April. Next week she will be meeting with the organic advisory task force folks in Wisconsin and will let us know what she learns from them.

Noreen noted that there are big changes happening with the Japanese organic certification equivalency program that has been in place. If changes go through this will have a big impact on farmer groups that are certified and market collectively. She also noted difficulties with hail insurance for organic crops and advised that others with this type of policy closely examine what their policy covers.

Noreen also noted that she has been part of a grant from the NWRSDP that is working with local chefs to get out information on local foods to media outlets. She also said that participants in a recent organic cooking class have continued to interact and have started an informal buying club that looks like it will morph even more activities. She said that Lakeside Packing is looking for producers of organic peas and sweet corn in the LaCenter area.

Jim said that the next ABCs of Organics workshop is scheduled for April 13 in Litchfield. These workshops are funded by a grant from the Risk Management Agency. There are several pieces of legislation still alive in the Minnesota State Legislature; things are changing daily but there are several positive pieces moving forward. He attended parts of the recent NOSB meeting. Pasture access issues continue to be contentious. The NOSB adopted a recommendation to change the regulation to clearly prohibit cloned animals, their products, and progeny in organic production.

Pauline is hosting a Danish student who is interested in doing volunteer work this year in vegetable production. Contact Pauline if you have ideas for projects for this student. Noreen noted that there is a potentially huge opportunity in raising organic vegetable seed.

Next meeting: Thursday, May 3, 8:30-9:30 a.m.

Jim will host; Meg will scribe

